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of DEAD BY DAYLIGHT

The Casting of Frank Stone

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EDITOR'S NOTE

THE LONG VIEW

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

IF YOU'VE BEEN FOLLOWING ALONG with our work at *Game Informer* for a long time, you've probably noticed the natural ebb and flow of content that defines the cadence of coverage. Early summer is often characterized by increased announcements and reveal previews, as game companies show off what's coming next. As we roll into the holidays, we ramp up our review and launch coverage as dozens of big games compete for attention at release. Sometimes, available access and interviews mean that many of our long-form features are ready to go simultaneously.

That's the case this month, as our issue is chock full of deep-dive investigative and interview-focused pieces from across the gaming landscape. For our cover story (p. 32), we've got a big story for horror enthusiasts; the team behind Until Dawn and The Dark Pictures Anthology has teamed up with the developer/publisher of Dead by Daylight for The Casting of Frank Stone, a new single-player narrative tale with extensive ties to the ongoing multiplayer game. That access also allowed us to speak with the Dead by Daylight team about the creation and remarkable growth of that game, which has continued to swell its audience worldwide in recent years (p. 42).

Look past that cover story, and you'll find an exclusive look at Visions of Mana (p. 48), that series' first new mainline entry in 15 years.

Separately, with the surprising breadth of strong game releases coming out of South Korea, we spoke with some of the major names in that development scene about the increasing strength of the region's game development efforts (p. 10).

We also have a fascinating look at the making of Vampire Survivors and how one man's passion project turned into a worldwide phenomenon (p. 18). We went deep with a speedrunning group about how just one game can lead to a thriving community of players united around a goal (p. 26). And on the label's 15th anniversary, we spoke with many of the individuals who have shaped the surprising success of Devolver Digital, and its many innovative and unusual games (p. 78).

I'm always proud of the work the *Game Informer* team creates to fill each issue, but the kind of in-depth feature development that's involved in articles like the ones described above is especially challenging. I hope you enjoy the results. By reading and subscribing to *Game Informer*, you're supporting that deeper understanding of the gaming hobby, and letting the voices of creators have a platform to be heard. Thank you for that.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
From the universe of DEAD BY DAYLIGHT
The Casting of Frank Stone

THE CASTING OF FRANK STONE

We traveled to Montreal for an exclusive deep-dive into The Casting of Frank Stone, the first single-player game emerging from the Dead by Daylight fiction. Senior Concept Artist Maïlys Garcia executed the work on our atmospheric cover image, which depicts the teens at the center of the story, still unaware of the evil that stalks their steps

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Editor-in-Chief
Matt Miller

Magazine Content Director
Kyle Hilliard

Online Content Director
Brian Shea

Associate Editors
Wesley LeBlanc
Marcus Stewart
Charles Harte

The heat is too damn high

Video Editor
Alex Van Aken

Visits Hoshino Coffee every trip to Japan

Production Director
Margaret Andrews

Lead Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin

Graphic Designer
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Web Designer & Programmer
Jon Woodey

Has Completionist++ in Balatro

Operations Manager
Sarah Hansen

Patiently waiting for the house to clean/fix itself

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle

Contributors
John Carson
Alicia Haddick
Jason Rodriguez
Lucas White
Pao Yumol

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Kyle Hilliard

Magazine Content Director

I've learned that I no longer have patience for games that encourage you to do the same activity over and over for slightly different results. Online multiplayer games that offer rewards for playing the same types of matches over and over. Loot-based games that give slightly different equipment for replaying missions. Even rogue games where each run's layout is slightly different rarely do it for me. Maybe I am spoiled. Or maybe I am getting old and my video game leisure time is too limited, but please don't make me repeat an activity. I have to make dinner soon.

Margaret Andrews

Production Director

Time for a mid-year reading check-in starting strong with things I've been enjoying: *Wolfsong* by TJ Klune, *When the Moon Hatched* by Sarah A. Parker (year of the dragon!), and *A Fate Inked in Blood* by Danielle Jensen (if you like the TV show, *Vikings*, you'll love this).

The second half of the year is coming in hot with so many things already in my to-read pile: *A Sorceress Comes to Call* by T. Kingfisher, *The Bright Sword* by Lev Grossman (*The Magicians*), *The Mercy of Gods* by James SA Corey (*The Expanse*), and finally *Wind and Truth* by Brandon Sanderson (The Stormlight Archive series is a must-read for me).

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Vampire Survivors was one of the biggest success stories of the last few years, and it came out of nowhere. Learn the fascinating story behind its creation.

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After years without a mainline entry, the Mana series returns. We've got an in-depth exclusive look at what to expect.

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The unlikely rise of Devolver Digital has led to some of the most unusual and innovative games of the last 15 years. Hear from the game makers who made it happen.

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Replies

OLD HAUNTS

I have put more hours into playing Destiny 2 than any other game by a wide margin. Over the last year though, after being entirely removed from that by Tears of the Kingdom, I found myself being hesitant to pick it up at all. Instead, I was enjoying a beautiful refreshing break by playing other games. It was so nice, that I thought maybe I'm done with Destiny 2; maybe I've experienced everything it can offer me. It saddened me a little to think this, even if I was enjoying myself with other games. With the expansion, I have picked Destiny 2 up again after over half a year away and I am happy to report that it's still incredibly fun. There is just something about this game that balances slightly campy sci-fi action with some of the most fun gameplay I've ever seen in an FPS that brings me back.

I'm curious, out of the people on staff, what are your favorite games that you cannot help but keep returning to even though there are dozens of other games that you might otherwise like to experience? Destiny, being a live-service game, is designed to do this, of course, but I'd be most interested in any answers that are not live-service games. Thanks for all the great content that you guys put out! Keep up the great work!

– Thomas from Raleigh, North Carolina via email

↳ *We've had our fair share of Destiny players over the years, not the least of which is our editor-in-chief Matt Miller (who also reviewed Destiny 2: The Final Shape on p. 73 of this very issue). Live-service games are built with the mission of bringing you back for more, and while they can be a massive gamble and have a relatively high failure rate – even when created by well-respected studios – when they hit, they hit hard. Associate editor Marcus Stewart can't resist diving back into Yu-Gi-Oh! Master Duel, video editor Alex Van Aken has poured over 1,000 hours into Fortnite over its many seasons, and production director Margaret Andrews has spent 3,000 hours in Overwatch. However, as far as live-service players at* Game Informer *go, we all pale compared to web designer and programmer Jon Woodey, who has played over 9,000 hours of Final Fantasy XIV.*

As for non-live-service titles, we all have our comfort-food games, but online content director Brian Shea has played through Final Fantasy X no fewer than seven times, while magazine content director Kyle Hilliard still plays through Mega Man X at least once or twice a year. There must be something about having "X" in the title, which would explain why they're replaying these games on their Xbox Series Xs. Perhaps Elon was on to something ... just kidding, we all still call it Twitter.

TRY TO KEEP UP

As the average age of gamers rises (because, you know, you can't stop from growing older), what are the ways that you continue to play games in the zeitgeist? I love to follow through podcasts and the occasional YouTube video along with great online journalism, but it's hard to find all the time to keep up with all of the great releases we've had recently.

– Chad from Michigan via email

↳ *That's the ol' conundrum, right? When you're young, you have no money to buy the games you want, but all the time to play them, and when you age, you finally have the money, but none of the time. Even as professionals in the games media space, we struggle with this. Keeping up with the onslaught of releases nearly every month has proven to be impossible for most people. For members of the* Game Informer *staff, we manage this in different ways, whether that be denial, anger, bargaining, depression, or acceptance. We're not quite sure why our backlog coping mechanisms correspond with the five stages of grief, but here we are.*

While one of our go-to moves is to burn some of our PTO with the explicit reason of spending a few hours playing games we've been meaning to check out, we know that's not an option for everyone. The best tactic for dealing with an accumulating backlog that you'll probably never clear is to just play what you feel like playing in the moment. If that means going back to that live-service game you've already poured 1,000 hours into or replaying a platformer from your youth, then as long as you're having a great time, resist the urge to feel guilty about not diving into the latest hot co-op shooter or 80-hour RPG. But keep doing what you're doing: listen to podcasts, watch YouTube videos, and read articles that might turn you on to the next game that you can't put down.

Soundoff: Mid 2024 GOTY Choices

We asked our readers and community what their Game of the Year is at the midway point of 2024. Here are some of their responses!

I'm having a hard time deciding between Final Fantasy 7 Rebirth and Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth. **– Cloud via Instagram**

Persona 3 Reload. The story is just as moving as it's ever been, perhaps even more relevant now. The combat was updated with some great additions from the newer titles but it still retained a distinct visual identity. Oh, and the music is incredible. **– Dan via Facebook**

I have played some great smaller games like Animal Well but Destiny 2: The Final Shape just hit all the right notes that it needed to for their 10 year finale. **– Brando via Twitter**

Dragon's Dogma 2 is my game of the year so far. I missed the first one, so I was blown away by the fluidity of the combat and depth of the exploration. I couldn't put it down until I got the platinum. **– Jarrod via Twitter**

Helldivers. It's the obvious choice honestly. **– Jonathan via Instagram**

It's honestly a toss up. Shadow of the Erdtree is baller, but Final Shape blew me out of the f***ing water. Helldiver's 2 was fine but it got boring. **– Christopher via Instagram**

Final Fantasy 7 Rebirth, but I also think competition is just less this year because of the ridiculous amounts of great games in 2023. **– Christian via Twitter**

Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth has been my GOTY since January, only thing that might take it out is Astrobot. **– Brandon via Instagram**

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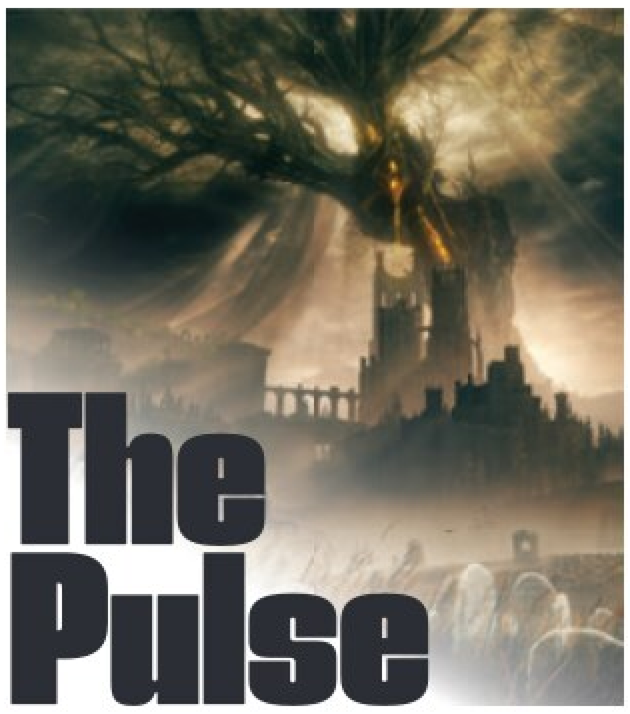
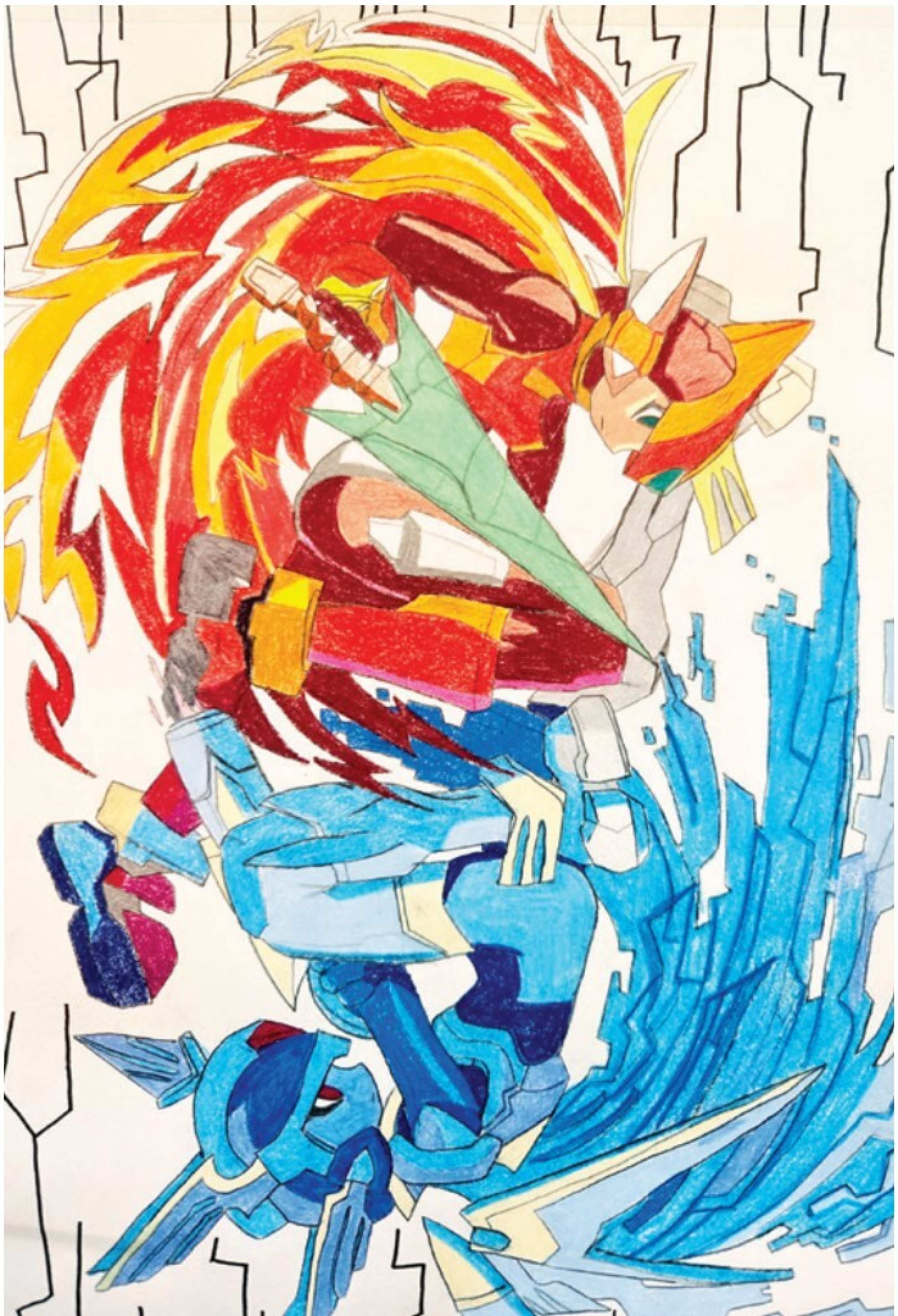


The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Elden Ring ▲
2. The First Descendant NEW RELEASE
3. Destiny 2 ▲
4. Starfield ▲
5. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom ▲
6. Star Wars Jedi: Survivor ▲
7. Stellar Blade
8. Dragon Age: Origins ▲
9. Alan Wake 2 ▲
10. Fallout 4 ▼

Reader art winner: Lila Schmidt



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BACK FOR MORE!

Hi! Long time reader, first time submitter. I've just been noticing how many games are being released with the intention of later providing DLC or expansions to complete the game. This works great for certain games like rogue-lites, sports, FPS, etc., but not so much in RPGs with lengthy run-throughs. I hate when I've sunk 100 hours into a single playthrough of Midnight Suns or Final Fantasy and then they expect you to play the entire game again to use one more character or have one extra chapter. Don't get me wrong, I love DLC for rebalancing and providing updates in replayable games, like extra leaders in Civ VI or new scenarios in Frostpunk. However, 'pre-internet' games used to come out fully finished as they didn't have the chance to update them later. Wondering what your thoughts on the matter are and if it is an issue? Or am I just time-poor and whining about a first-world problem? **– Christopher via email**

↳ *You're correct that DLC after the release can be a tricky equation to solve for. Theoretically, we'd love to go back and revisit/extend our favorite experience in an all-new way. But, realistically, how often will we actually do that? We can't tell you how many times we've played a game, absolutely loved it, and then bought the expansion pass, only to never return to that game once the new content hits several months later. This is a point that the team in charge of creating content for Persona 3 Reload was especially aware of when creating its story expansion that comes out this September (read more in our preview on p. 66).*

But not everyone plays a game right when it releases. You mentioned Marvel's Midnight Suns, which has added several new playable characters since launch, and the Final Fantasy series. Considering Final Fantasy XV's massive overhaul of certain chapters and additional mid-story episodic DLC, someone who plays Midnight Suns or Final Fantasy XV for the first time today will have a drastically different (and probably better) experience than those who played on day one. It's a double-edged sword. On one hand, developers can release games they know will evolve over time, meaning that day-one players might not get the best experience. But on the other hand, when a game shipped in the pre-internet days, what you got was what you got, for better and for worse. If you bought a game that was a glitchy mess, short of recalling the game, the developer had no means of fixing it. Yes, you could make the case that some companies have used this as a safety net to release broken games with the promise of post-launch patches, but we tend to think it's an overall positive.

WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME

As a Seattleite and fan of The Last of Us Part II and Infamous Second Son, I felt that the portrayal of Seattle in both games is vastly different. The Last of Us 2 feels like it was made by people who really know the streets, in a realistic way. Whereas infamous feels like it was made by people who Google image searched and haphazardly put it together. Although realism isn't everything, I can't help but feel like Infamous' portrayal was an empty shell, and that game could've been anywhere, while The Last of Us Part II feels like it couldn't exist without the Seattle background. What is your perspective on the usage of real-world locations in video games and what are the best games that felt like they couldn't take place anywhere else?
– Jacob from Seattle, Washington via email

↳ *The Last of Us series, in general, is exceptional in its portrayal of real-world cities. We still have fond memories of the horrifying trip through East Coast cities like Pittsburgh and Boston in Part I. When there's a shining example like The Last of Us games, it makes most other comparisons, like your contrast between The Last of Us Part II and Infamous Second Son, unflattering. But sometimes, as you correctly point out, realism isn't everything. What's most important is that the gameplay fits well into the design – just look at Forza Horizon 5's extremely truncated version of Mexico as a great example of it being far from realistic but still a blast to play in. The best-case scenario is when form – or in this case, realism – meets function through games like The Last of Us Part II, Marvel's Spider-Man, or The Division 2.*

To avoid feeling trapped by realism, several developers instead opt to create approximations of well-known cities, like Grand Theft Auto V did with Los Santos (Los Angeles) and the Yakuza series did with Kamurochō (the Kabukichō district of Tokyo). Those titles aptly capture the spirit of the areas they're emulating without being beholden to real-world accuracy. That way, the developer can wink at its players with various real-world references without people wondering why their favorite street isn't a one-to-one recreation.

Reader art submission: Dean, almost age 11

Reader art submission: Edwin Calderon

Reader art submission: Ken Huntley

Reader art submission: Angelica Madrid, age 16

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

1

2

3

ELDEN RI
SHAD
4

5

1.

While at a party celebrating 40 years of Tetris, Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell shared a moment with The Tetris Company co-founder Henk Rogers

2.

While at Summer Game Fest, Brian caught up with the man behind the show, Geoff Keighley. When Brian suggested they get a picture, Geoff said, "For GI Spy?" You know it, Geoff. You know it

3.

Charles! Oh no!

4.

Brian was sure to dodge-roll after each question during an extended sit-down with From Software's Hidetaka Miyazaki

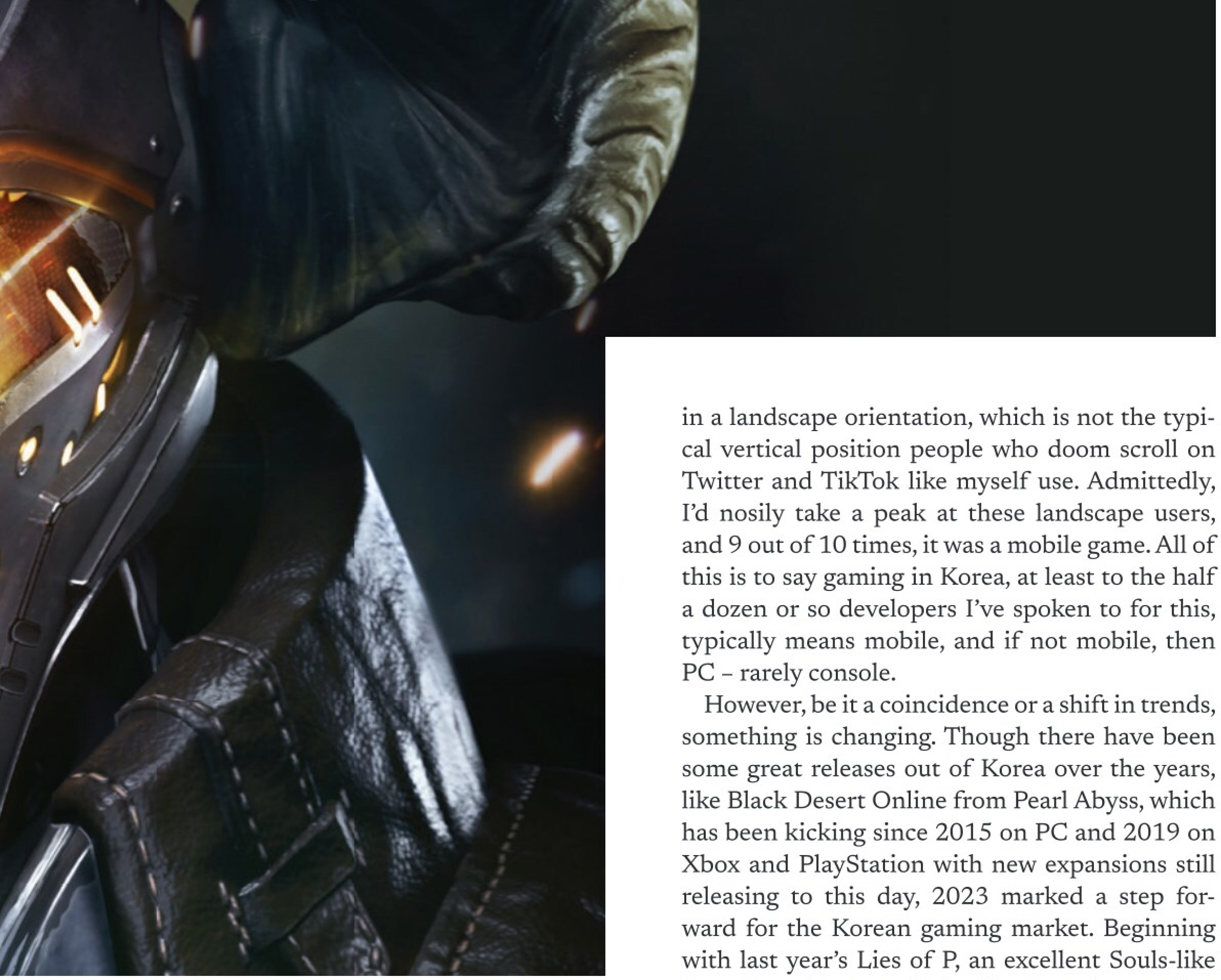
5.

To put a bow on Summer Game Fest 2024, several current and former members of the *Game Informer* staff met up over dinner ■

GOING GLOBAL

Though Korea's gaming scene is largely PC and mobile-centric, as trends shift, developers are starting to aim West more than ever before

BY WESLEY LEBLANC



↘
Nexon's
The First Descendant

In April, I traveled to Seoul, South Korea, for a behind-the-scenes feature on The First Descendant, Nexon's recently released looter-shooter. A large part of my discussions with that team while visiting the studio centered on Nexon's push to make The First Descendant a global release. Sure, as a Korean-developed title, the company wanted Korean players to enjoy the game. However, visual and mechanical inspirations by way of Warframe, including a free-to-play model with seasonal content drops in one of the most popular genres in gaming, were part of Nexon's plan to appeal to the global audience. With an all-time peak of 264,860 players on Steam at the time of writing and presumably a large number of players on Xbox and PlayStation, it seems Nexon's efforts have paid off from at least a numbers perspective – though it's far too early to tell how it will fare critically in the eyes of players as live-service games like these have much to prove weeks, even months, after the initial launch.

But during this visit to Nexon's headquarters in Seoul, I couldn't help but research more about Korean gaming trends, both for personal interest and in relation to that feature on The First Descendant. It wasn't hard to find someone gaming on their phone on trains, sidewalks, in parks or cafes, and just about anywhere else in the city. The telltale sign was someone holding their phone in a landscape orientation, which is not the typical vertical position people who doom scroll on Twitter and TikTok like myself use. Admittedly, I'd nosily take a peak at these landscape users, and 9 out of 10 times, it was a mobile game. All of this is to say gaming in Korea, at least to the half a dozen or so developers I've spoken to for this, typically means mobile, and if not mobile, then PC – rarely console.

However, be it a coincidence or a shift in trends, something is changing. Though there have been some great releases out of Korea over the years, like Black Desert Online from Pearl Abyss, which has been kicking since 2015 on PC and 2019 on Xbox and PlayStation with new expansions still releasing to this day, 2023 marked a step forward for the Korean gaming market. Beginning with last year's Lies of P, an excellent Souls-like from Neowiz's Round8 Studio, the cadence of releases out of Korea has been a boon for console gamers worldwide. Stellar Blade launched exclusively on PlayStation 5 earlier this year, The First Descendant launched on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC a few months later in July, and looking ahead, NCSoft is launching Throne and Liberty on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC this September. Jumping to 2025 and beyond, Pearl Abyss is launching Crimson Desert, a sprawling single-player RPG, and Nexon's Neople is planning to release The First Berserker: Khazan, a single-player action RPG set in the long-running Dungeon & Fighter universe.

Curious about the shift I noticed, I spoke to six teams about what's happening in the Korean game development scene to learn more. And though there's no single answer, it's clear that more than ever, Korean developers are looking to capture the broader gaming market in ways they've not done before. If the aforementioned releases and excitement around upcoming titles are any indication, it's working well.

"We definitely sense a transformation is beginning in the Korean game industry," Lies of P director Ji Won Choi tells me via email. "Previously, the focus was almost entirely on mobile games, particularly genres like MMORPGs, collectible gacha games, and idle games. Now, there is growing interest in the PC/console market, and many teams are beginning to develop for these platforms."

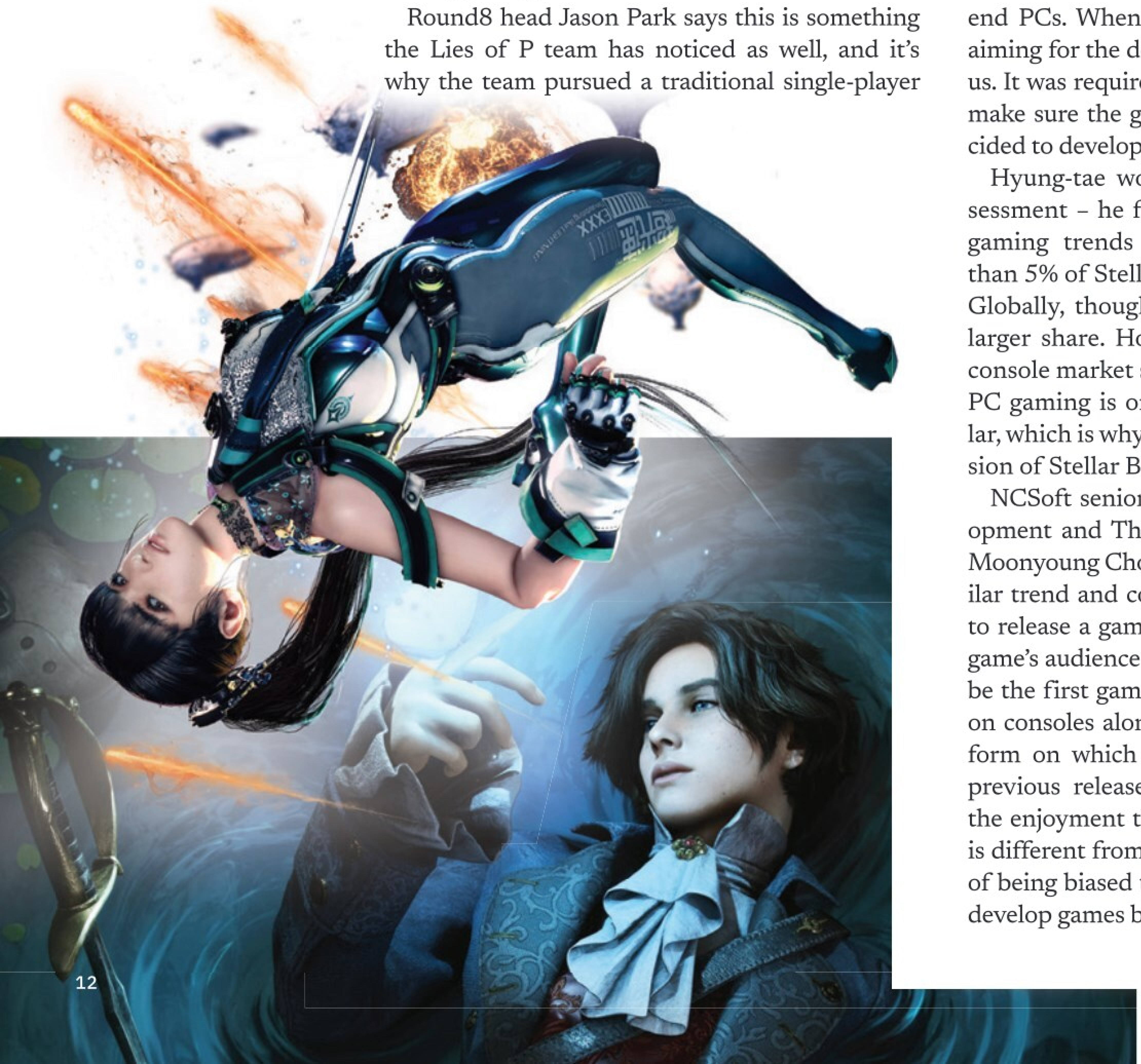
PLATFORM SHIFT

Choi says he recently attended a mid-term presentation at a university with a game development program, and out of the 17 teams there working on graduation projects, only one was working on a mobile game. "It feels like we are at the start of a significant shift, and I'm proud that Lies of P has been part of this change."

Stellar Blade director and Shift Up CEO Kim Hyung-tae believes this shift results from mobile gaming's population aging out of the model in Korea. He says the mobile market there is highly centered on microtransactions and having to spend a lot of money to progress through gameplay and auto-farming, and for good reason: This "kind of guarantees high profits for game companies" that succeed in the market, he says. However, he feels this type of gaming comes with a restriction that's becoming more apparent each day. Players who can afford the costs of mobile gaming tend to be older, at least "middle-aged."

"That's continued for the past 20 years, and players have become older, so it's harder to acquire new and younger users for the games," Hyung-tae tells me through a translator, noting a lot of forbidden practices, like selling and trading game accounts, are happening as a result.

Round8 head Jason Park says this is something the Lies of P team has noticed as well, and it's why the team pursued a traditional single-player console release. "In 2019, we started to think about what could be the next title for the studio, and that's when we found the trends shifting to other areas," Park says through a translator. "The content war started booming, and people had more leisure time." He says this leisure time, which grew even more due to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, isn't just for gaming, though, as people are tuned into media elsewhere, like made-for-streaming shows and movies, more than ever before. Instead of making something in the MMORPG genre like its previous release, Bless Unleashed, which requires a lot of time and investment from the player, it considered a shorter, more immersive experience that you can play through in a few days. That experience became Lies of P.



Top:
Shift Up's Stellar Blade;
Bottom:
Round8's Lies of P

When I ask Park if the studio was nervous about releasing Lies of P instead of something more in line with the Korean gaming market, his answer surprises me: Round8 wasn't aiming to convert Korean gamers to consoles and the traditional games associated with those platforms.

"There is kind of a fixed number of people who enjoy single-player games on the console or PC platforms [in Korea]," Park tells me. "It won't change. The gamers on mobile platforms who enjoy their casual games, it's very hard to convert them into hardcore gaming with console or high-end PCs. When we developed Lies of P, we felt aiming for the domestic market wouldn't work for us. It was required to aim for the global market to make sure the game was successful [...] so we decided to develop the game on consoles."

Hyung-tae would likely agree with Park's assessment – he feels the console share in Korean gaming trends isn't growing, noting that less than 5% of Stellar Blade's sales came from Korea. Globally, though, console gaming owns a much larger share. However, while he doesn't see the console market share increasing in Korea, he says PC gaming is only becoming increasingly popular, which is why the team is considering a PC version of Stellar Blade.

NCSoft senior vice president of product development and Throne and Liberty "camp captain" Moonyoung Choi says the studio recognizes a similar trend and considers it an "important matter" to release a game on consoles and PC to widen a game's audience. Notably, Throne and Liberty will be the first game developed by NCSoft to launch on consoles alongside PC, the latter being a platform on which it has found great success with previous releases. However, Choi says, "I think the enjoyment that games can provide on mobile is different from that on PC and consoles. Instead of being biased towards one side, we are trying to develop games by expanding into various genres."

↓
NCSoft's
Throne of Liberty

CONSOLE SUCCESS

For this reason, Hyung-tae says Shift Up is still contemplating its next steps after Stellar Blade. Though it considers Stellar Blade a great success, its mobile games, like Goddess of Victory: Nikke, are great successes, too. Hyung-tae hopes the synergy between these two games grows, with players who enjoy Stellar Blade giving Nikke a go and vice versa. But beyond that, Shift Up is still determining what's next, even if it thoroughly enjoyed developing a single-player action game for PS5.

"After that challenge [Nikke], we thought we could take on the console market," Hyung-tae says. "There are a lot of developers in Korea that want to create console and single-player games, but there are not that many game companies here willing to go for that challenge. Compared to mobile games, the return is less." He later adds, "We are definitely going to continue to take up the challenge [of developing console games], but there are a lot of worries. The increase in development cost is one thing, compared to mobile games, and the fact that console sales don't continue," referring to how mobile games have the capacity to make money months, even years, after launch, which is not necessarily the case with single-player console games.

He says Shift Up wants to continue making console games but is looking to avoid including in-game purchases and small microtransactions while maintaining the business. That's why he wants other console releases out of Korea to succeed: the more success there is, the better the country's gaming output performs.

Neople CEO and game director of The First Berserker: Khazan Myeongjin Yun recognizes this challenge Hyung-tae mentions and says he fully supports it: "Seeing Korean game developers, who have traditionally focused on online and mobile games, taking on the challenge of creating games across various platforms and genres is something I [...] eagerly anticipate and fully support. This effort has already begun to pay off, with several games gaining worldwide recognition in just the past year or two, which I find incredibly inspiring."

Pearl Abyss America CEO Jeonghee Jin agrees, adding, "Three or four years ago, you could not name a single console title from Korea," although she, perhaps humbly, isn't noting the success of Black Desert Online, which hit Xbox One and PlayStation 4 in 2019. "You couldn't think of a big title from Korea on console, but nowadays, you see more and more."

Jin says the recent hit rate of Korean games that succeed outside of Korea is not a coincidence and is likely the result of Korea's emerging place as a global entertainment phenomenon. She says K-pop, K-drama TV shows, and Korean movies are more popular now than ever before, and, in a rising tides way, Korean games are now, too.

In contrast to Hyung-tae, Jin feels an ample reason console gaming is starting to become more popular for Korean game developers is that the market share is finally growing, something that began with the PS4 generation. According to her estimations, the console market share was probably less than 1% before the PS4, but she puts it at about 5 to 6% today in Korea, with mobile taking 50% and PC gaming the rest. While other game development scenes like Japan and the United States have been working on console releases since the start of console gaming in the 1980s and ‘90s, she says Korea really only started its big console push with the previous PS4 generation, putting Korean game developers behind by a few generations (in terms of experience). However, with some time, Jin believes Korea will catch up in that regard.

“I think Korean games are very high quality; that’s what we are proud of. We are almost obsessed with quality, especially graphic quality and action combat, and we really want to say we are the best,” Jin explains, joking that Korean culture trains people to be competitive. “We are really used to competing with each other, trying to be the top-ranked or at least not fall behind in school or elsewhere. It’s the same in the video game industry; not only do we work hard on creativity, but we’re always thinking about how to be the best at whatever we do.”

She says Korean game developers look at what successful Western games are doing and learn all they can from it to appeal to that market. “It’s about mixing old stuff and creating something unique on top of it.”

Beomjun Lee, The First Descendant producer and head of Nexon’s Magnum Studio, says the team’s desire to release a console game stems from the difficulty of creating something unique for the mobile market.

“From a business perspective, most of the games in Korea are concentrated on mobile games, and those games are mostly MMOs,” he says. “Within this concentrated market of mobile games, it’s really hard for us to come up with something new and go for new challenges, so we had to think of something that would help us go out to global audiences. We had to choose a platform that’s widespread enough, and that was consoles.”

Hyung-tae says, in retrospect, post-Stellar Blade, the entire process of Shift Up developing its first console game was complicated. “Everything was difficult,” he says. “In Korea, there are not many console game developers, so there were a lot of things we had to learn from scratch. But the whole process was joyful.” He adds that the Korean game development scene is close-knit with friendly ties because everyone’s worked together at some point, making it easier to discuss challenges and successes

Pearl Abyss’ Black Desert Online (top left) and Crimson Desert (center) ↘

and get advice from industry fellows. For example, he worked with Lee on the 2012 free-to-play MMORPG Blade and Soul (an NCSoft game), and the relationship forged then lives on today. The two play each other's games, provide feedback, and share tips, tricks, and more for navigating the console market. Lee says that since there aren't many console developers in Korea compared to mobile developers, staying connected and learning from every example is essential.

"Especially after the reveal and release of Lies of P, many teams have approached us for advice on preparing console games," Round8's Choi says. His coworker, Park, adds, "We don't need to bring up the Kevin Bacon comparison, but everyone knows the industry because you know everybody here. We've been talking to Shift Up and getting to know them lately and talk about how hard it is [to develop single-player games for console and PC]."

GLOBAL RECOGNITION

I close out each interview with these developers by asking them about this moment in Korean game releases to see if they've noticed it and are proud to be a part of it. Each has a different feeling about this "moment," but they all recognize it's happening and feel honored to play a role in it.

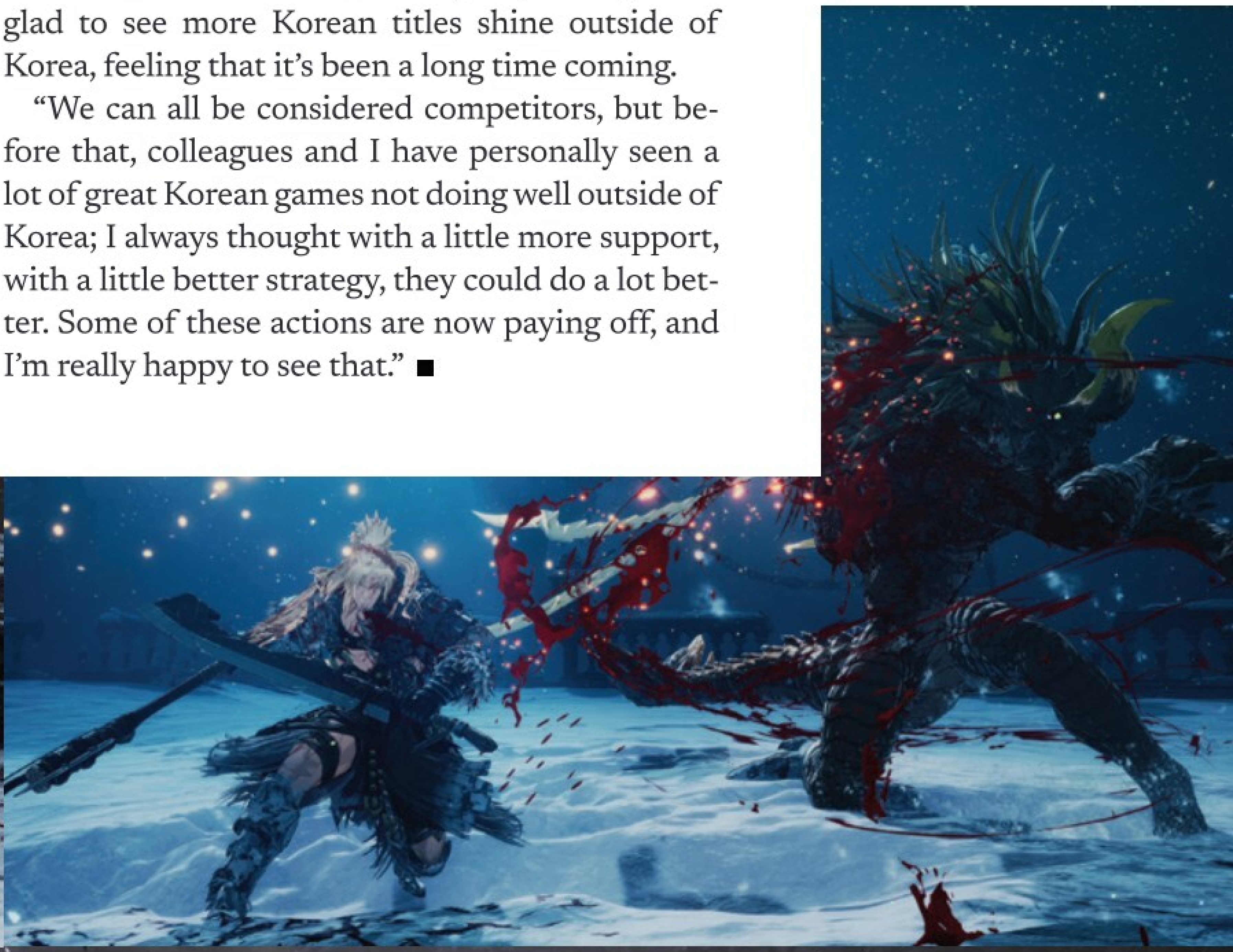
Lee tells me he thinks Korea still has a long way to go to catch up to Japan, China, Europe, and the U.S., and notes it's hard to pitch console games to partners and convince them there's space outside of mobile gaming to flourish. NCSoft's Choi says the recent Korean success is a trend, but the team hopes it's not fleeting.

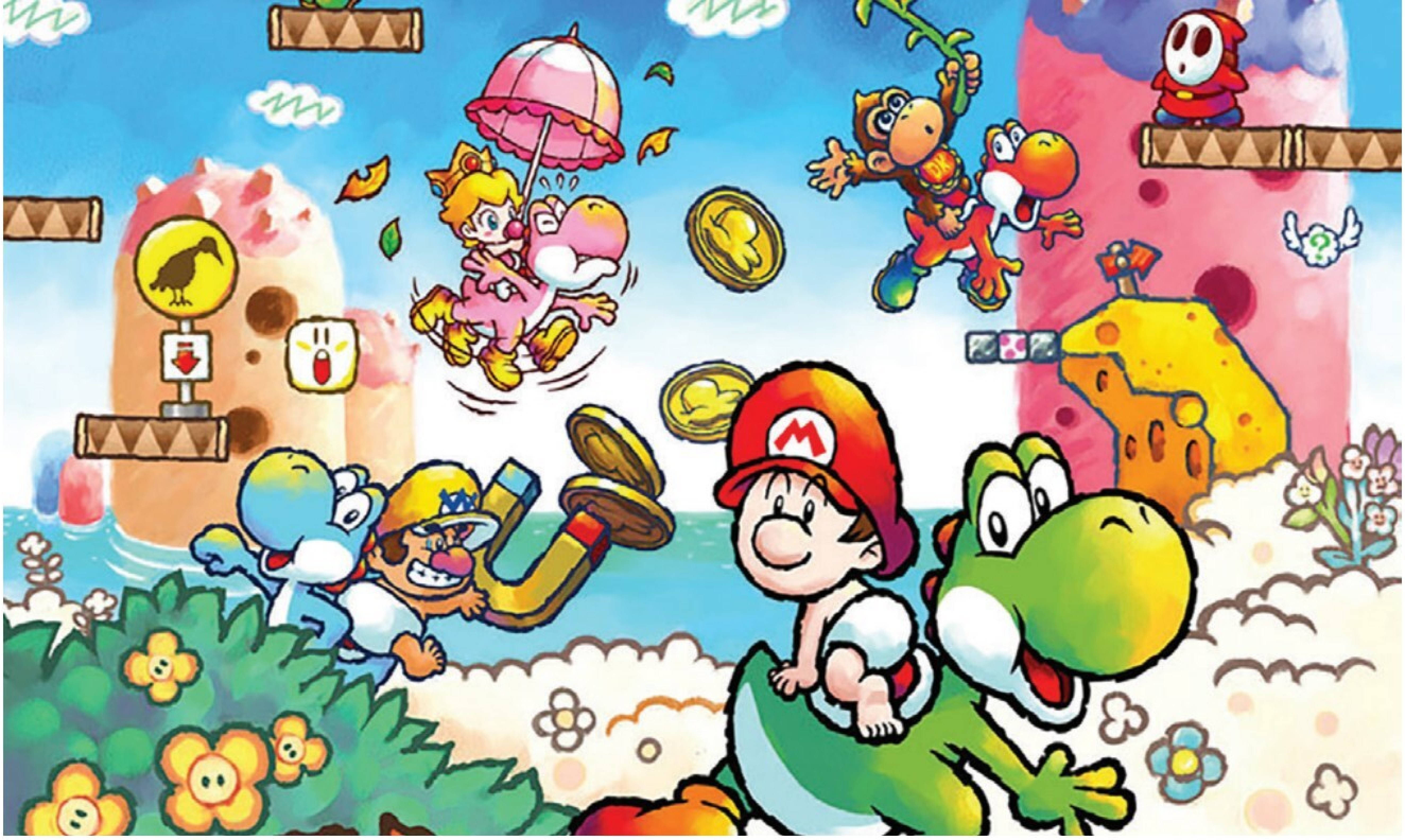
"I think the Korean game industry has the homework of overcoming the preconception that it's all about grinding," Choi tells me. "Each of the games being released now has been pondered for at least 3 to 5 years on how to gain global recognition, and as a result, we are starting to see a variety of genres, platforms, and high-quality games. We expect these efforts to be recognized in the global market."

Neople's Yun welcomes the recent recognition, adding that working on a project that aligns with this new direction in Korean game development "drives me to create something truly exceptional." Jin concludes our interview by explaining she's glad to see more Korean titles shine outside of Korea, feeling that it's been a long time coming.

"We can all be considered competitors, but before that, colleagues and I have personally seen a lot of great Korean games not doing well outside of Korea; I always thought with a little more support, with a little better strategy, they could do a lot better. Some of these actions are now paying off, and I'm really happy to see that." ■

Nexon's
The First Berserker:
Khazan
↓





TOP FIVE

CRYING BABIES

The only way babies know how to communicate is to cry, and in video games, sometimes that is an effective motivator. Or a supreme annoyance.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

1 The first time you drop **Baby Mario** in **Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island** is a memorable experience. You will do anything, including putting Yoshi in immediate danger, to save Mario. But the main reason you need to get Mario back in the saddle is to never hear those infernal screams again.

2 Sometimes a crying baby is a nuisance, but for **Isaac** in **The Binding of Isaac**, being a baby and crying is an empowering weapon. Isaac fights villains in his monster-filled basement using his tears (and various upgrades) to appease his mother. It's a strange but effective setup.

3 The world of **Death Stranding** is supremely bizarre and dangerous, filled with its namesake – death – at every turn. But nothing is more upsetting than when **Lou** lets you know they are uncomfortable inside their little glass bottle. Even when outrunning Beached Things, there is always time to pause and calm Lou.

4 It turns out Gorons can do more than eat rocks and sleep. In **The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, the Elder's Son** shows he misses his father by crying so loud that he extinguishes all nearby torches. You can calm him, but when you restart the three-day cycle, he's always back to tears.

5 One of the most effective and disturbing sequences in **Max Payne** is when the titular protagonist is stuck in a dream trying to find his crying daughter, **Rose Payne**. Max must relive an abstract version of the worst night of his life, and it is punctuated by Rose's cries for help. It's a difficult but undeniably memorable moment in the trilogy. ■

INTERVIEW

CONVERTING BORDERLANDS

REVEALED IN 2007 (on the cover of *Game Informer* magazine) Borderlands was pitched as Diablo meets cinematic icon, Mad Max. Now, 17 years later, the acclaimed video game is entering the medium it drew its inspiration from with a Borderlands movie (ironically, the same year as the fifth Mad Max film). We spoke with the film's director, Eli Roth (*Cabin Fever, Hostel*), to learn about the film and why *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) was an important inspiration for the sci-fi action. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

What is your history with video games?
Eli Roth: I'm not a gamer by today's standards, but I grew up in the first generation of Atari 2600. I saw the evolution and I was like an insane game player before the term gamer existed, basically, until about college. Sega ... that's where I started to tune out a little bit. Only because of time. I was just so focused on making movies. And every time I tried to get back into it, the games got more and more and more complex. But I love them, and I've always wanted to adapt the game. I've played Borderlands, but I'm not a gamer by today's standards.

How many individual, unique prop guns did you make for the movie?
That's a really good question. It has to be... I mean, I don't want to say hundreds? But I mean ... the different variety? I mean, we had the Dahl guns and the Hyperion ... so many of those Atlas guns, because we had a full Crimson Lance. We made hundreds of them.

That's where the money went. We spent the budget on art. It was like a giant art project between the extras and their costumes and Sanctuary City. I looked at *Barbarella*, *Toby Dammit*, and *Fifth Element* – everything is thought through. It's like this insane, bonkers fashion parade of these lunatics. It was so much fun.

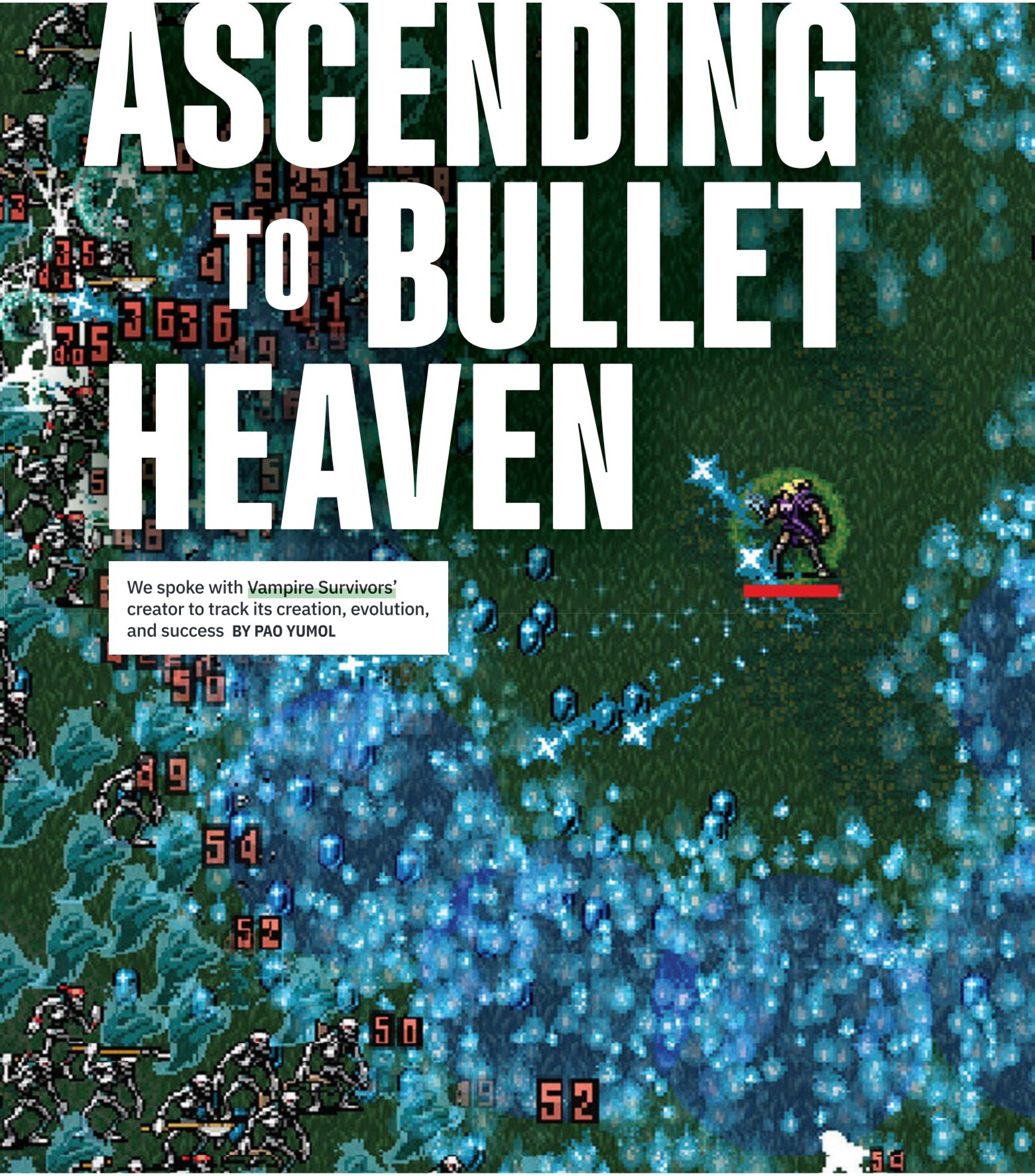
Was it hard to convince Cate Blanchett to join the film? Or do you, her, and Jack Black have *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* text thread that you just jumped into?

I love Cate [Blanchett]. I absolutely adore her. And we had such an amazing time on *House with a Clock* that she said to me, "You're not allowed to make a movie without me." When Cate Blanchett says that, you listen. [...] And I said to her, "There's this character – I think we can do something really insane with this property. Something that is so fun and big and colorful, like *Barbarella* or *Fifth Element* or *Toby Dammit* or *Escape from New York*. I want you to be that character that's a mix of like Clint Eastwood's The Man with No Name, or Snake Plissken." And she goes, "Well, you know, *Escape from New York* is my favorite movie." Of course it is. And no one would know that because why would you ask her about Snake Plissken when she's being interviewed about Lydia Tár? Other directors would want to see Cate with the conducting stick, and she's brilliant. She's the best of the best. I want to see her with a flame thrower. [...]

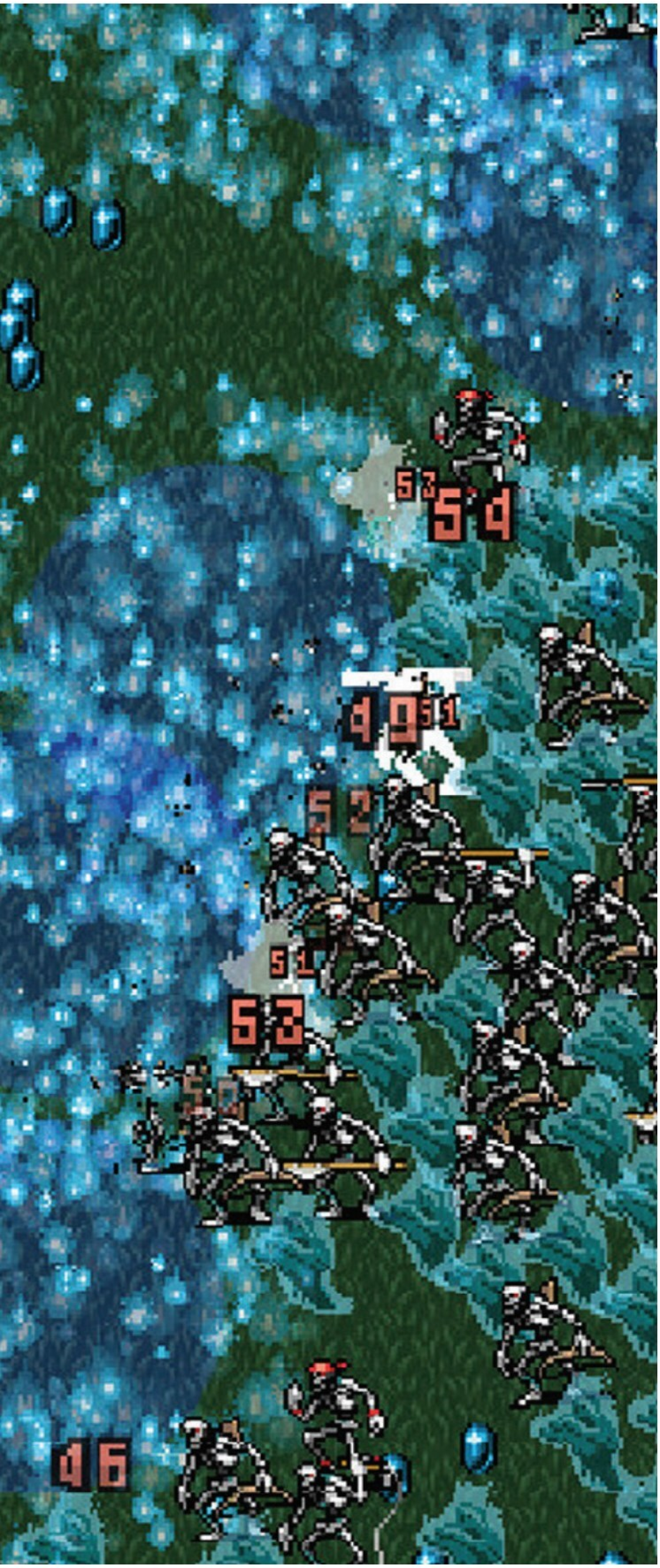
[Cate and I] showed Ariana [Greenblatt] Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* to check New Wave film. We talked about just insane, off-the-wall performances. We looked at *Letter Never Sent*, the Russian film. Just weird stuff with Ariana. She's like, "What should I watch? *Suicide Squad*?" I said, "No, watch *My Dinner with Andre*," and she did it. Just to see if she did I said, "Go watch Andy Warhol's Empire State Building movie," and she was like, "Okay," And she pulls it up on YouTube. It's 8.5 hours because it's just a shot of the Empire State Building and I said, "I know, just watch it and see what happens." And she did! We had an iPad on set of like, *My Dinner with Andre* and we would just be watching it and then I'd be like, "Okay, go!" And she would throw a bunch of bombs and kill a bunch of bandits [laughs]. It somehow became the warm-up for going completely bonkers. Ariana and I are on the same frequencies. It's so fun to watch them all together in that world. They just went for it. ■

Head to GameInformer.com for the full, unabridged interview with Eli Roth. Borderlands *is in theatres August 9*

ASCENDING TO BULLET HEAVEN



We spoke with Vampire Survivors' creator to track its creation, evolution, and success **BY PAO YUMOL**



By minute fifteen of an ideal run of Vampire Survivors, you should have one foot shoved in the doorway to godhood. The screen sings with cascading, varicolored damage values, a sea of numbers lacerated by radiant weapon effects: beams of light, explosions of confetti, an entire arsenal of axes and whips and knives hurled in every direction at once. Pushing your thumbstick should feel like dragging a paintbrush against the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, smearing Gothic levels with a mist of evaporating enemies.

On the one hand, Vampire Survivors is a simple "auto-battler" that you can play with one finger, a game where you attack automatically as waves of enemies overtake the screen; on the other, it's a vehicle for procedurally-generated power fantasies, evoking the game's promise to "be the bullet hell." Like its developer, Luca Galante – who runs the studio, Poncle – Vampire Survivors is playful, experimental, and bustling with offbeat ideas.

Vampire Survivors' surprise success in 2022 became the catalyst for a burgeoning microgenre, inspiring other developers to publish their takes on the game's inventive formula. The story behind its development is riddled with happy accidents and welcome surprises, demonstrating how much Vampire Survivors reflects Galante's character.

O, CHRISTMAS TREE

Even after achieving widespread success, Galante is exceedingly humble. He's quick to point out his foibles. If you tell him you've logged hundreds of hours playing Vampire Survivors on Steam, Galante doesn't gloat – he apologizes for taking up so much of your time. He's also disarmingly charismatic in how he pokes fun at his sensibilities, exuding a sense of humor both in conversation and throughout Vampire Survivors' design.

Case in point: the Christmas tree. Jan. 7, 2022, was a historic date for Galante. He'd published Vampire Survivors through Steam's Early Access program for just $3 the month before, but it received scant attention on release.

On that day in January, he was taking down his Christmas tree – adorned with an empty package of Terry's Chocolate Orange instead of a star – when a friend messaged him through WhatsApp, asking if he'd checked in on Vampire Survivors recently. When he looked online, he was incredulous at what he'd found: Steam sales had spiked and were on a steady incline. A YouTuber named SplatterCat had published a glowing review of the game, directing hundreds of thousands of viewers to the game's store page. In the following months, Vampire Survivors would achieve a meteoric rise in popularity.

Galante was so floored that he forgot all about taking down the Christmas tree. It remains in his apartment to this day as a monument to that moment of discovery. “It’s become a symbol,” Galante says. “I cannot touch it anymore, right?”

DISCOVERING MAGIC SURVIVAL

Prior to Vampire Survivors, Galante had spent his whole life interested in game development. His fixation on games started at an early age; even when he didn’t have access to a PC, games inspired him to draw, and he found himself filling a handbook with illustrations of weapons he’d invented for Ghosts ‘n Goblins.

He only started developing games after graduating from college. Android games were his focus, and he spent his spare time building prototypes. He gravitated towards Phaser, a free open-source game engine that runs on HTML5.

His passion projects rarely intersected with what he did for a living. After quitting a job at McDonald’s, he had a stint working on mobile games for a gambling company, where he absorbed aspects of game design via “osmosis.”

Otherwise, making games was a personal creative pursuit. Galante spent his time trying out other games in the mobile market, looking for opportunities to fill a niche. “I was mostly trying to jump on whatever was trendy at the moment,” he says. “I remember making something like Fruit Ninja back then.”

These early projects, however, rarely achieved fruition. Galante found it difficult to sustain the initial excitement of getting a prototype together, and he often spent more time playing them than cultivating them. “I stopped developing [...] when the prototype had become fun enough,” he says.

What he really wanted was a framework: a skeleton of a game that he could embellish with original ideas. To Galante, the most thrilling part of game development was designing new content – iterating on a template instead of cultivating the game’s foundation. Part of what drew him to Phaser was its accessibility, which allowed him to treat the engine as though it were a game like RPG Maker.

He was surfing through the Android marketplace when he found 2019’s Magic Survival, a mobile game by a Korean developer named LEME. Magic Survival inspired the game’s “auto-battler” design, limiting the player’s input to a single finger. As in Vampire Survivors, attacks are automatic, and weapons scale as the player defeats hordes of enemies.

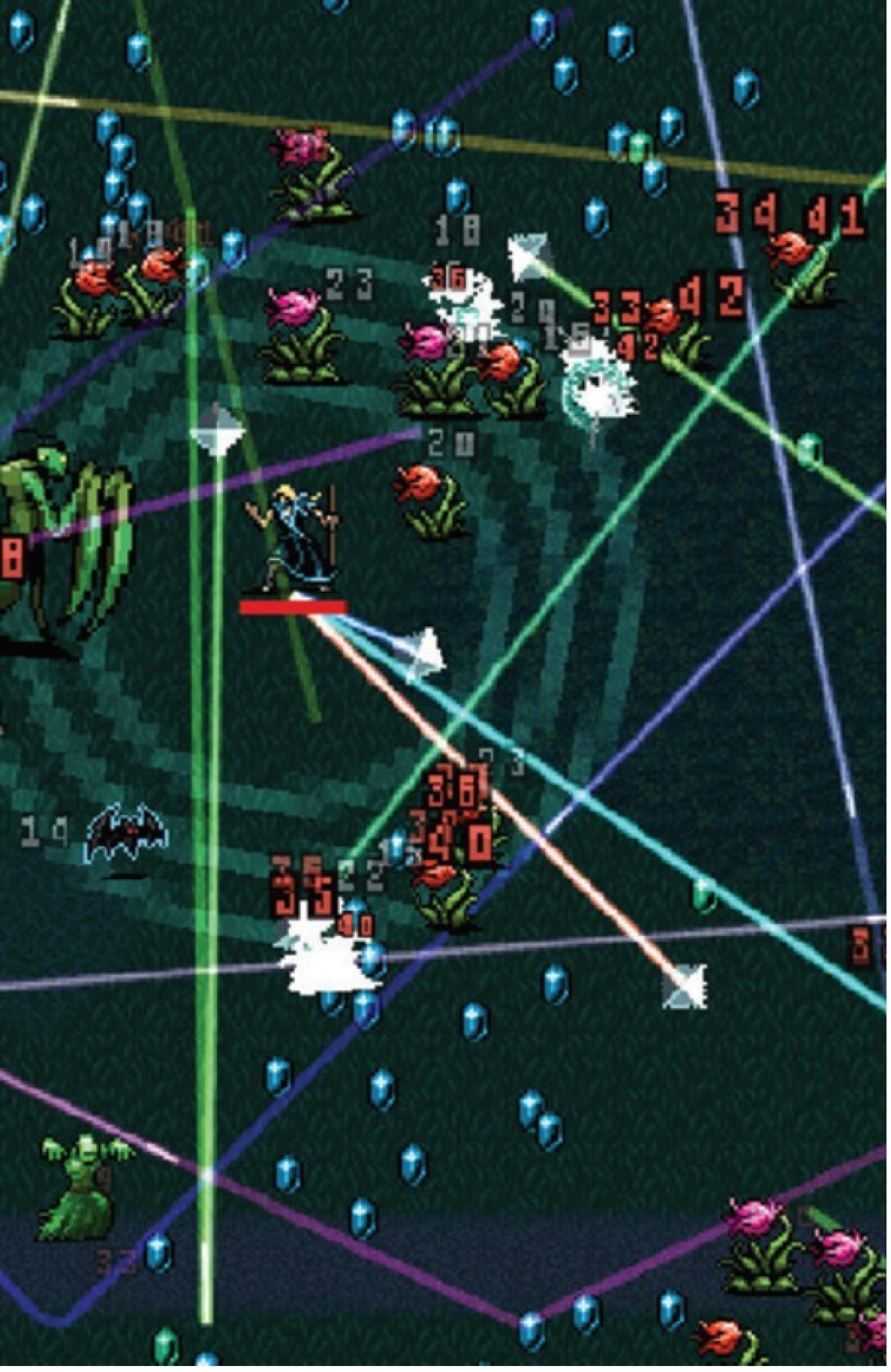
Though Galante was put off by most of the mobile games he’d sampled – often polluted with ads and microtransactions – he was impressed with Magic Survival’s depth, which earned it a modest online following. He took the game’s fanmade wiki as a sign that it invited curiosity about its secrets and inner workings.

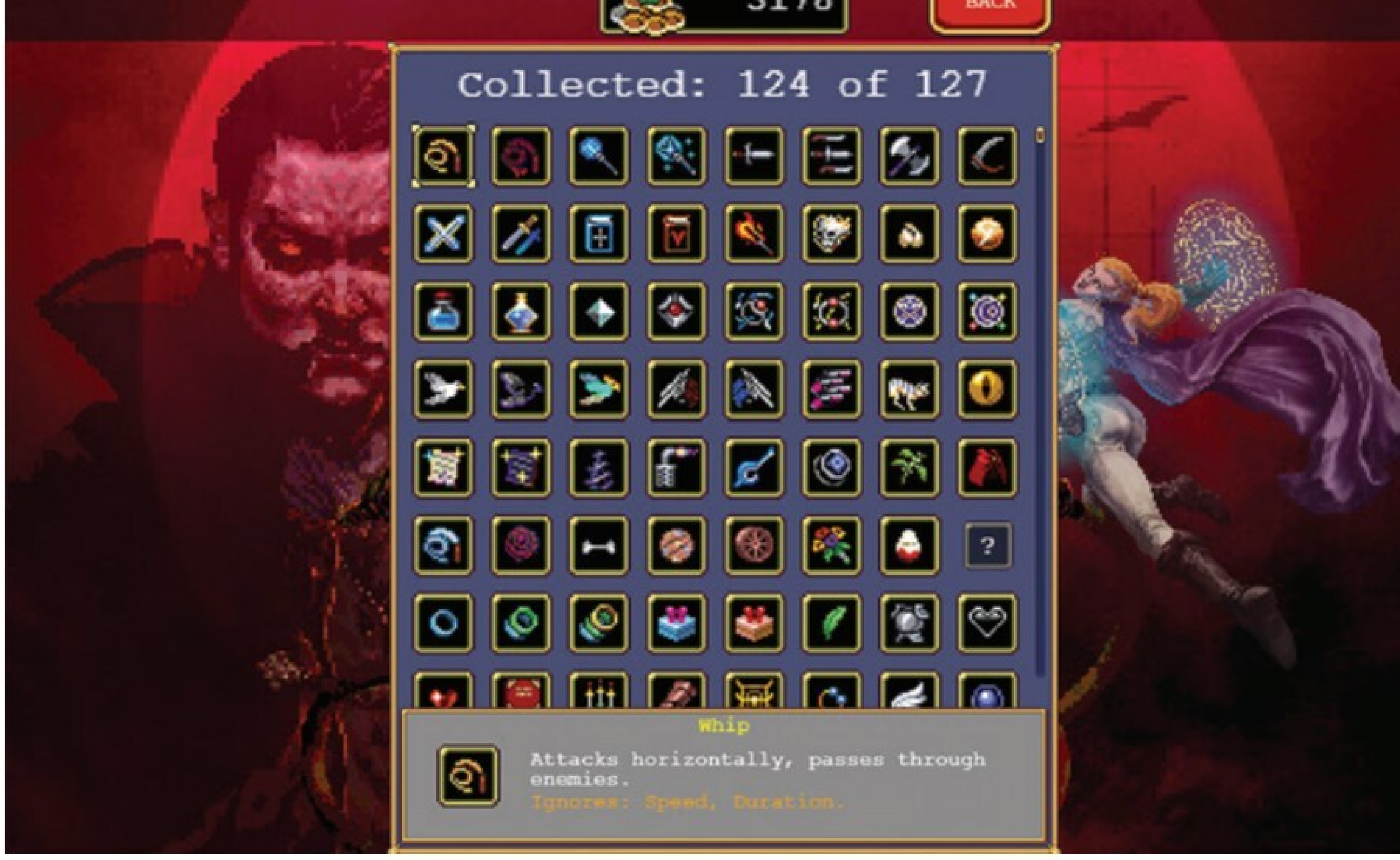
He reverse-engineered Magic Survival in Phaser, producing a rudimentary version of the game with default Phaser assets. Like his other prototypes, he found it fun to play even in a bare-bones state, sans UI, sound effects, or proper character sprites.

Next, Galante added assets he’d extracted from a free, Castlevania-themed pack of sprites. He swapped out placeholders for 16-bit bats, candelabras, and skeletons that crumble when struck. “That’s when I fell in love with the visuals,” Galante said. “These sprites were not getting rendered at the right size. They were all very chaotic, messy. There was a lot of green on screen, with a giant mantis and grass on the floor.”

That sensation of visual noise persists in the game today. Whether stretched to comic proportions or multiplied to fill the screen, Vampire Survivors’ sprites convey the spirit of joyful cacophony that brings the game to life. Though its assets might have been inspired by Castlevania, the game’s overall aesthetic is Galante’s own. It’s an exuberant re-interpretation of Castlevania’s Gothic motifs, a hyperactive pixel art collage that wobbles with the mischievous glee of a funhouse mirror.

This proved to be Vampire Survivors’ missing ingredient: something that expresses Galante’s sense of humor and captures his unique impulses as a game designer.





Collected: 124 of 127

Whip

Attacks horizontally, passes through enemies.

Ignores: Speed, Duration.

HAVING FUN THROUGH THE CODE

Now that Galante had a workflow, he began iterating on Vampire Survivors' framework.

He adopted a mercenary approach to the game's design, omitting features he felt were superfluous or distracting. He was determined, for example, to eliminate the "feature creep" that can come with obsessing over narrative. He'd learned not to waste energy on developing lore to justify the relationships between each character and weapon.

Instead, he decided to design weapons "on the fly," grabbing individual assets from the Castlevania-inspired pack and coding their attack patterns on the spot. This allowed him to sustain the playfulness of his creative process, affording room for improvisation and touches of comedy. He describes his method as, "Just have fun through the code until it feels right."

Vampire Survivors' weapons exemplify the game's off-kilter creative direction. Though weapons like the "Whip" might feel intuitive, weapons like the screen-clearing "Pentagram" or the confetti-stuffed "Cherry Bomb" offer more exotic effects. For example, the "Gatti Amari" weapon summons cats that swipe at the player and pilfer unattended pickups. When two cats collide, they generate boisterous "cat fights" that damage players and enemies alike.

As weapons receive upgrades and undergo potent "evolutions," they take up more screen space, splattering the screen with clashing patterns. Weapons like "La Robba" – which spawns pieces of furniture that bounce down the screen like pachinko balls – toy with the orientation of in-game gravity, creating ripples in the tapestry of digits and projectiles draped across the screen.

To this day, designing new weapons and characters is Galante's favorite part of the development process. Sometime last year, he booted up Vampire Survivors and discovered a character he didn't recognize. Apparently, he'd gotten so carried away with coding the new mechanics that he "blacked out" while working on it late at night and completely forgot that he'd added them to the game before sleeping.

"That was so weird," he says. Though it was jarring, it was also a sign that he'd become intimately familiar with his toolkit, allowing him to abide by his instincts. "Somehow, that comes from knowing your tools very well – your programming language, the game framework, and all of that."

He often allows his predilection for puns and cheap visual gags to direct the creation of new mechanics. Take "Science Rocks," for example, a weapon released as part of an Among Us collaboration. It populates the screen with colorful rocks that explode when the player touches them.

The title alone acts as a pun – the sort of slogan you'd see printed on a poster stapled to the wall of a grade-school classroom – but its evolution takes the joke one step further. Once "Science Rocks" evolves, its projectiles turn into grids of numbers, mimicking one of the menial tasks Among Us assigns to players. Completing the sequence by stepping on numbered tiles in an ascending order results in a devastating attack delivered by rocket thrusters.

Once Galante designed the evolution's mechanics, he felt it was only natural to call it "Rocket Science," alluding to the weapon's obscure means of activation. "It's just going to make fun of the fact that the player cannot figure it out by themselves," Galante says.

Evolutions exemplify the game's graceful balance between hidden and overt information. Players discover them by achieving synergies between weapons and passive, stat-augmenting items. These pairings are initially kept a secret, encouraging experimentation from run to run. Other unlockables hide behind devious riddles – "Be a good boy" in a specific stage – while some trigger by chance. This approach contributes to a continuous, euphoric sense of discovery.

Though players often attribute various elements of Vampire Survivors' design to Galante's experience in the gambling industry, he maintains there's only one mechanic that directly resulted from his time there: the treasure chest.

While working on a slots-based game, he received a piece of music intended to play during a payout. "I loved that piece of music, but the actual animation they gave us to pair with the music was awful," Galante says. Later, while working on Vampire Survivors, he used the music as the basis for the animation that plays when opening chests.

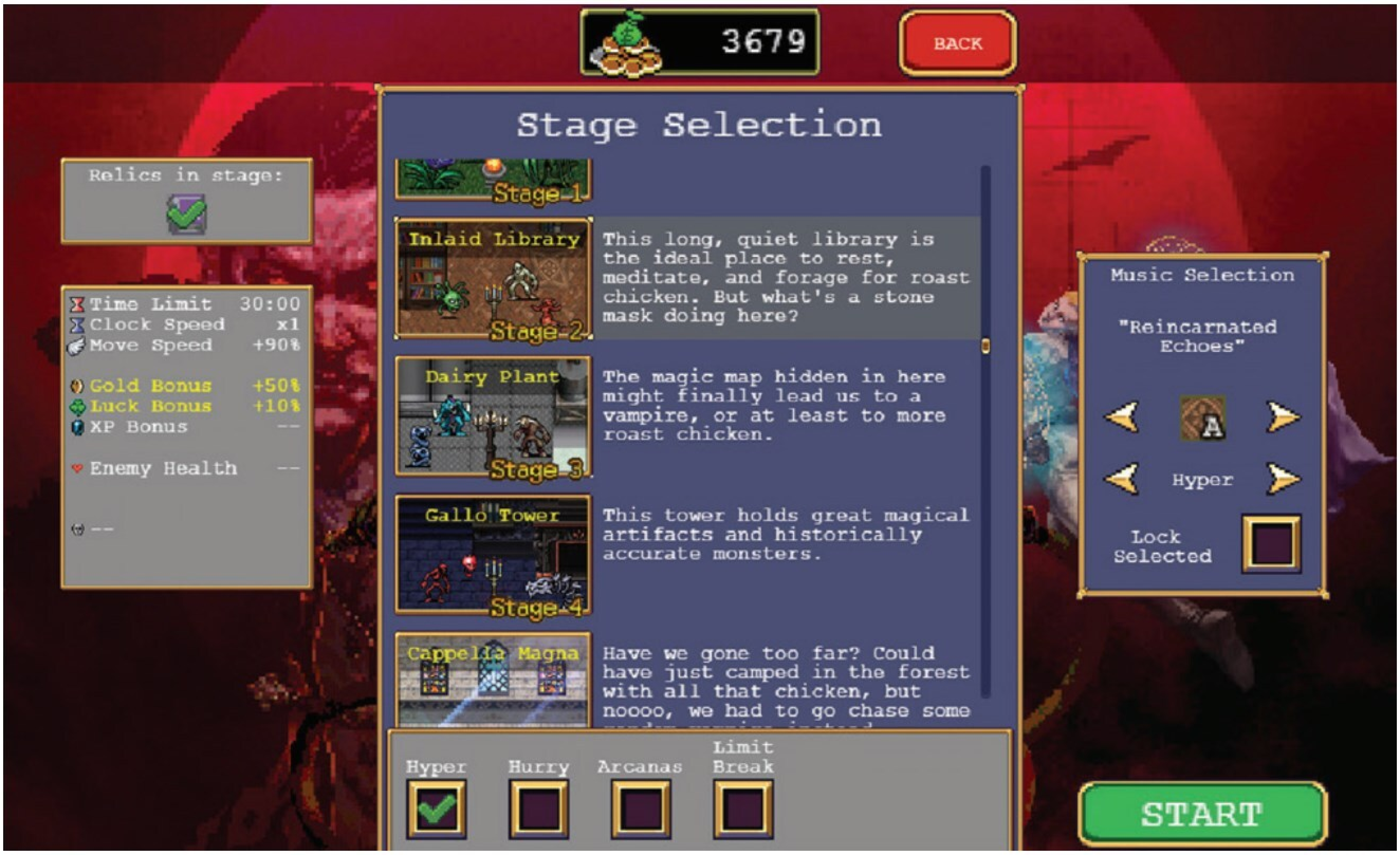
When the player opens a treasure chest, a fountain of coins erupts from its bowels as items rapidly scroll across the screen, mimicking the rotating cylinders of a slot machine. The music swells to an ebullient fanfare as the animation ends. "The fact that you get all these coins flying around the screen, the counter that goes up for absolutely no reason," Galante says. "All of that 100% comes from that industry."

Apart from that, however, Galante sought to avoid the clutter of microtransaction offers and unskippable advertisements that plagued the mobile games he'd played. He wanted to eliminate friction when designing the game's UI, preferring practicality to overwrought visual aesthetics. This meant large buttons, minimal menus, and succinct animations. He was especially inspired by One Step from Eden, a roguelike action game with a UI that's stylish but snappy.

These choices, while idiosyncratic, reflect the design philosophy that made Vampire Survivors such a success. As a developer, Galante is driven by the same epiphanic moments of discovery that guide the game's players. To finish a round of Vampire Survivors is to partake in Galante's devilment; his sense of humor is as contagious as laughter itself.

THE BIRTH OF PEPPINO

After that fateful day in January, Vampire Survivors continued to climb the Steam charts, garnering tens of thousands of concurrent players well into 2022. Even still, Galante was incredulous at its success. "Suddenly, half the industry wants to talk to you, and you find in your inbox emails from Xbox, Nintendo," he says. "And you think it's a bunch of jokers that are making fun of you."



Time Limit 30:00
Clock Speed x1
Move Speed +90%
Gold Bonus +50%
Luck Bonus +10%
XP Bonus --
Enemy Health --
--

Inlaid Library: This long, quiet library is the ideal place to rest, meditate, and forage for roast chicken. But what's a stone mask doing here?

Dairy Plant: The magic map hidden in here might finally lead us to a vampire, or at least to more roast chicken.

Gallo Tower: This tower holds great magical artifacts and historically accurate monsters.

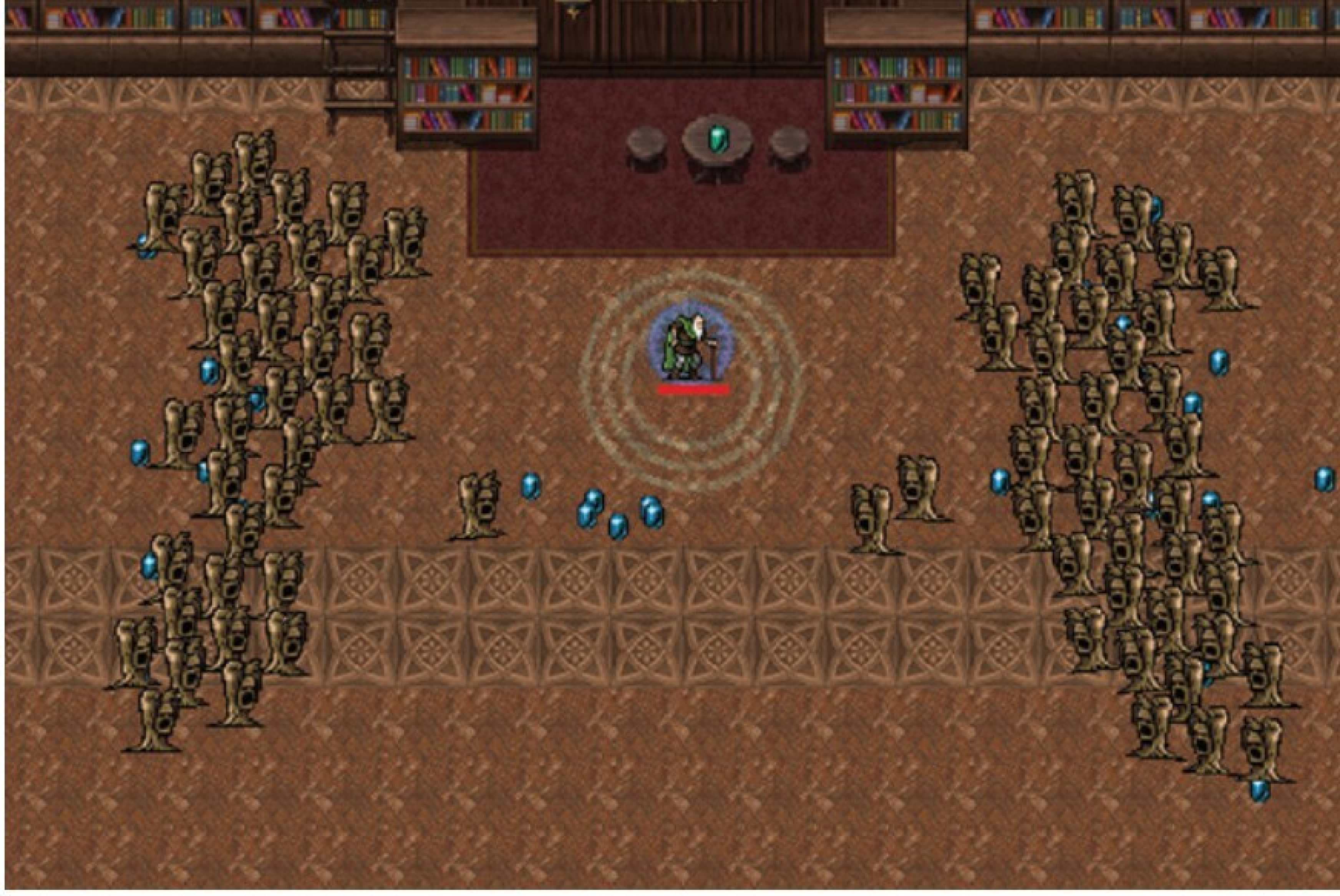
Cappella Magna: Have we gone too far? Could have just camped in the forest with all that chicken, but noooo, we had to go chase some

Music Selection: "Reincarnated Echoes"

Hyper

Lock Selected ☐

Hyper ☑ Hurry ☐ Arcanas ☐ Limit Break ☐



As the reality of his success began to dawn on him, he began to feel a sense of urgency. Though he welcomed the increase in sales, a rapidly expanding playerbase meant grappling with new challenges. "Sure, the game was in Early Access and everything, but now you suddenly went from, I don't know, ten players to a thousand," Galante says. "And so now even little problems become big problems."

As his audience scaled, so did the volume of players affected by bugs and imbalances. He explains that the game's tech stack was intended to handle more lightweight applications than Vampire Survivors. At first, he relied on friends for technical help, but he eventually began cultivating a team, establishing Poncle as a proper studio.

Over the past couple of years, he's learned to temper the free-spirited approach that originally directed the addition of new content. "Don't get me wrong, it still happens. I still treat the game as my little toy I can play with over the weekends," Galante says. "Because if I suddenly stop having fun with it, guess what? I think that it will show in the content as well."

Nevertheless, he's since found it rewarding to design content with player expectations in mind, even if it requires a measure of "professionalism." "I don't mind having some limits and some expectations to live up to when doing new content, basically," Galante says.

The game's success also created another major problem: the issue of copycats. "Now, the situation is much more under control, but the first few months were an absolute nightmare with the game getting stolen and uploaded on different platforms," he says. Galante, who normally detests the business-oriented facets of development, found himself working with solicitors to take down carbon copies of the game on various marketplaces. Despite that, he recognizes that Vampire Survivors kickstarted its own microgenre and acknowledges that other developers have re-interpreted its systems with the genuine intent to make something new.

After all, it's difficult to ignore the game's influence on the Steam marketplace since it found success. Dozens of self-described "survivors-likes" have taken inspiration from Vampire Survivors' systems. Some call them "bullet heaven" games – a play on "bullet hell" shmups – while others call them "auto-battlers."

One of the microgenre's most successful titles is HoloCure: Save the Fans!, a free-to-play fangame starring a cast of vtubers signed to the agency Hololive. Picayune Dreams interjects "survivors-like" gameplay with narrative passages, substituting Vampire Survivors' Gothic fantasy with interstellar surrealism. Vampire Survivors' systems have also begun to transcend the top-down format; Whisker Squadron: Survivor, for example, synthesizes "survivors-like" progression with dogfighting combat that hearkens back to Star Fox 64.

Despite inspiring a movement in roguelike design, Vampire Survivors still stands apart from its peers. A part of that is its elegance; though dozens of weapons have been added to the game since release, none of them deviate from the "single-stick" rule. Despite its busy and chaotic visual aesthetic, the hidden math behind its pacing feels precise, reflecting the arduous process of trial-and-error that helped Galante define its curves.

But to best illustrate what makes Vampire Survivors unique, recall the Christmas tree. In mid-2022, Galante had noticed that players were embarking on self-imposed "no movement" challenges. He wanted to add something to the game to acknowledge that, and he had an unused sprite of a pine tree handy. Meanwhile, he still had this Christmas tree sitting in his apartment, an empty box of Terry's Chocolate Orange still adorning it like a crown.

That's when it hit him: the idea for Peppino. "The name Peppino in Italian means a pine tree, basically," Galante says. "And so my incredibly stupid brain just put all those bits together." The next patch added a playable tree named Peppino who can't move. Instead of ornaments or Christmas lights, the tree is covered in oranges wrapped in golden foil.

The game never explains any of this backstory to you, and only an Italian-speaking player would pick up on the pun embedded into Peppino's name. But when you unlock Peppino and load him into the game, it doesn't take long to comprehend the humor behind it – after all, you're playing a tree rooted to the ground, forced instead to drain the HP of any enemy who enters your vicinity. You've become one of Galante's works of art: a jubilant, nonsensical, beautiful thing to behold. ■

NEW FOR GAME NIGHT

BY MATT MILLER

1
HARMONIES

2
WATER LIMIT
TREASURE
WATER
TRAP
CURSE
AMULET
EXIT
LEGEND
SWAMP
FENCE
BUBBLE

❶ HARMONIES

Some board games have an undeniable elegance that's hard to articulate but comes out in a single play of the game. The beauty of Harmonies is not in innovation – the tile-laying is familiar – or in concept; establishing habitats to attract wildlife is a tried-and-true approach. Instead, excitement comes from smooth tactical options that rise to the fore within minutes as you lay out rivers, mountains, and more to bring in a unique mix of animal species. Out of simple rules and a brisk playstyle, the depth sneaks up on you, accompanied by whimsical, colorful art. Harmonies is a stellar new addition to the gaming scene; don't be surprised to see it pop up in various awards as the year continues.

$35 | *store.asmodee.com*

❷ LANDMARKS

Playable either cooperatively or competitively, this brilliant word association game finds your team lost in a jungle, seeking treasure and a way to escape the island, aided only by one-word clues. Each clue is written on a hex tile by a player "navigator" who attempts to connect words to suggest your next direction. So, the hex for "Claw" might suggest a board placement in between your earlier hex for both "Cat" and "Excavator," since both words could link to that new one. Hidden traps, curses, and other unique spaces hide around the board, so tread carefully! Ideal for word lovers of all ages, it's creative, collaborative, and great fun for players of any experience level.

$25 | *floodgategames.com*

③ STAR WARS UNLIMITED

Opening the door to a new trading card game is a dangerous proposition – a potent threat to both time and wallet. That remains true with the excellent Star Wars Unlimited, but strong mechanics, flexible deck-building options, and the long-established canon of characters and conflicts of that far-away galaxy make a potent argument for giving it a shot. The new second wave (Shadows of the Galaxy) layers depth into an already smart play structure, built around recognizable leader cards alongside unique Aspects (like Heroism, Aggression, and Cunning) that determine card capabilities and connect different cards in fiction-appropriate ways. This is the vastness of the Star Wars universe reimagined through the lens of collectible card match play, and these early months of release show promise of a big future ahead.

$35 (2-Player Starter) | *starwarsunlimited.com*

④ KINGDOM RUSH: ELEMENTAL UPRISING

While hundreds of mobile game developers have tried their hand at the tower defense genre, few have surpassed the long-running success of the Kingdom Rush series. That formula has proven challenging to translate well into the board gaming world, but Lucky Duck Games manages the feat; Elemental Uprising is rollicking fun. Mimicking the exaggerated caricature style of the video games, the cooperative and scenario-based adventure looks attractive laid out on the table. But it also plays exceptionally well, with a gradual unfolding of new units and towers as you explore the game, and a taut balance that keeps each session tense and exciting. If you like the vibe of tower defense titles and would like to experiment with a thoughtfully constructed multiplayer twist on the formula on tabletop, this is an easy choice.

$70 | *luckyduckgames.com*

⑤ TALISMAN: 5TH EDITION

Avalon Hill's Talisman has been a staple of thematic board gaming for decades. With a simple "roll-and-move" mechanic, the game has never been the go-to option for a night of complex strategy. Instead, the high-fantasy setting, approachable play, and irrepressible sense of adventure have sustained the game for so long. The new 5th edition features gorgeous art, a dozen evocative miniatures, and a streamlined rules system that gets everyone playing fast. It's an easy family game night option with much more imagination and panache than buying properties and passing Go, even if the depth is in that same ballpark. ■

$60 | *shop.hasbro.com*

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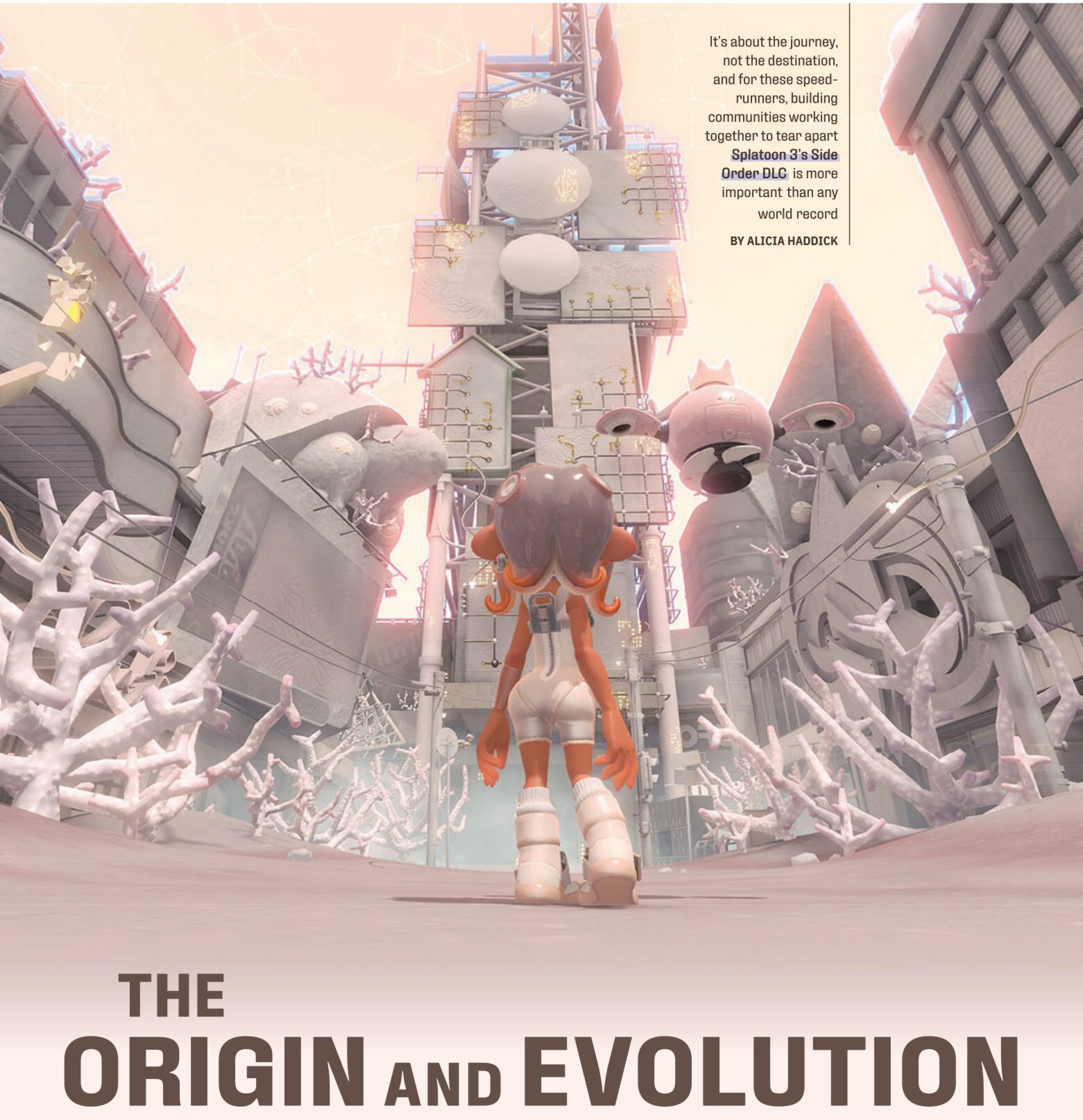
WARLOCK'S CAVE
CITY
DOCTOR
ENCHANTRESS
MERCENARY
SORCERESS
OBJECTS
FOLLOWERS



It's about the journey, not the destination, and for these speedrunners, building communities working together to tear apart **Splatoon 3's Side Order DLC** is more important than any world record

BY ALICIA HADDICK

THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF A SPEEDRUN

What is a speedrun? Players often dedicate hundreds of hours to playing the same game endlessly, all hoping to achieve the best possible completion time. How does a game's playthrough evolve from a developer's carefully crafted 'intended experience' to the extravagant, skillful deconstruction often paraded by world record holders at the twice-annual Games Done Quick charity livestream? Most of all, why bother putting all that effort into such a task in the first place?

First, we need to understand what a speedrun isn't. It isn't about glory. For many, world records are not the goal of speedrunning. Stories about world record completion times in iconic games like Super Mario 64 make for flashy headlines, and seeing that respect for your efforts from strangers is certainly exciting. But for many speedrunners, such awards are merely a bonus – a byproduct not just of their own efforts, but the effort and support of friends and communities that each strove for that same goal together. By the time they receive their name in lights, they got what they wanted from speedrunning a long time ago.

To most who participate, this hobby is a journey of understanding, a pursuit of knowledge where the people you meet along the way are far more important than the answers you seek. It's a collective effort to break apart their favorite games in the hope of being able to complete them as fast as possible. To understand speedrunning is to understand the community that supports this goal.

SPLATOON 3 AND THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

It's February 22, 2024, and the Splatoon speedrunning community Discord server is filled with excitement. The eagerly-awaited all-new roguelike DLC campaign for Splatoon 3, Side Order, has just been released, and for a specific community over 1000 people strong across the franchise, everyone is excited to finally get a chance to dive into a notable new take on the regular gameplay of a series they love. They're eager to play. Then, they want to break it into pieces.

While many are excited to try the game and inevitably speedrun it, the moderators in charge of both the Discord server and the leaderboards in conjunction with the Japanese-speaking community are urging restraint. Please, have fun at your own pace before you try to find ways to speedrun it. "The Side Order leaderboard is currently under an embargo for the next two weeks while we figure everything out," they decree. Holding back the official launch of leaderboards to track records wasn't just to avoid those seeking the self-centered five minutes of fame and glory of a temporary world record. With time comes greater understanding, and perhaps a community-wide consensus of what it even means to 'beat' Side Order and what categories and rules should be enforced for a level playing field across all players.

A consensus needs to be reached to make the rules for speedrunning fun for everyone and manageable for moderators who need to verify that runs submitted to the leaderboards are free from cheating. “We set a 24-hour no-spoiler embargo. Just go play the game, don’t speedrun it, go have fun,” laughs Bee, a former moderator and one of three runners behind the so-called Side Order Megadoc, an extensive guide ranking recommended chips (multiple-choice random powerups offered between levels as a way of boosting your abilities during an ascent of the tower), level tips with video guides, and more to help runners interested in playing the game for themselves. “Splatoon 3’s leaderboards were rushed out the door with categories suddenly rushed into existence when there weren’t agreements in place for them to be created, which we wanted to avoid with Side Order.”

Not only that, but it was also hard to judge how the Side Order campaign would actually function before players could get their hands on it for themselves. This DLC was far different than any other campaign featured in the franchise to date. It took notes from roguelikes such as Hades in its random ability-modifying chips to improve weapon strength, ink regeneration, and more. Rather than a static set of levels and a clear path to victory, the tower randomizes level order and chips, forcing players to deeply understand these skills and learn strategies to achieve the fastest time.

Balancing a speedrun such as this is difficult from a moderation perspective, but it also brings a unique challenge to players. Either they learn to embrace the chaos or find order within this randomness.

The game is split into two main categories: Any%, which simply requires players to complete a run as fast as possible on a new save file using the default Splat Dualies, or New Game+, a category subdivided into individual leaderboards based on your choice of weapons and timed using the in-game timer, as opposed to real-time Any% runs. Other categories exist, such as categories for those wishing to clear the game with ‘All Palettes’ (completing a run with every weapon), but these remain the two main categories, each with the goal of climbing to the tower’s summit as fast as possible.

Activity in the galvanized community was lively from the moment the game launched, with players comparing their times, the chips they used to enhance their abilities, and which level types to play. As they shared their runs amongst themselves, some began to notice a pattern in how these ‘randomly chosen’ levels were being organized.

“A couple of runners both on the Japanese side and the English side came forward, and they were like, ‘Hey, we’ve noticed that these stage values are consistent with the stage types’,” Bee recalled.

This discovery allowed the group to put together a chart that attached the seemingly random level designations to the values denoting each level prior to selection and work out how each level linked to one another to create consistent paths and inform runners in their decision-making on which stage to play during their attempts.

This effort radically transformed the speedrunning experience, especially in New Game+. Rather than being at the mercy of what the game threw at you, players were now capable of guessing some random elements, even allowing for so-called 'set seed' speedruns, with players able to consistently reproduce the same sequence of levels in consecutive runs.

"It completely changed the dynamic of the speedrun," recalled runner Pick. They also noted that the choice for New Game+ records being timed using the in-game timer, coupled with a discovery that saving and suspending your game between levels when the timer doesn't progress could further manipulate your level and chip selection, made it even easier to guarantee a best-case selection of levels and chips in every climb. "In my first New Game+ speedrun I got a 2:59 minute record with a very rough route. I played a lot of pretty long levels that I would never even consider putting into a route today. This discovery meant you could theoretically guarantee to get the exact levels you want, with the exact chip rewards you want, in the exact same order."

With a constant stream of discoveries, from ways to manipulate the random selection of levels to a growing consensus on what chips were best for any given weapon, it soon became difficult to keep track of all the knowledge a player would need to consider before even pressing a button. Before long Bee, alongside fellow runners LonTr0 and MoxyK_, chose to pool the community's collective knowledge and their own experience into an in-depth guide, lovingly titled the Megadoc. The aim was to compile an in-depth guide to every weapon and level, alongside the general consensus on the strengths and weaknesses of each chip.

Work on the guide was intense, taking weeks of either creating bespoke recordings or taking clips from other runs of level strategies to showcase surefire methods to complete them as fast as possible. Even now, it continues to be updated as consensus and strategies evolve and players discover new techniques. It's a vital resource for new runners, while even those hunting for world records use it as reference material for the best path during their own attempts.

"Working on the thing sucked!" Bee exclaimed, before quickly clarifying. "It was fun, but it sucked! I remember that week me, [LonTr0_] and Moxy sat down to work on this document, and we would sit in voice calls for six or seven hours straight every day, cross-referencing different runs to look at level strategies or see what the Japanese runners were doing. We were debating constantly, is this a level you actually wanted to do in a run? What are the best strategies if you tackle it?

"We were all just sitting in a call together, creating tables, creating videos, watching how the top-level runners were playing. We'd watch runners like [Japanese Any% world record holder] Motoro or Haitex, who each horrify me with how good they are, looking for good references in what they were doing. Meanwhile, I was occasionally popping into the Discord and asking things like, hey, how do you guys feel about this level? But a lot of it was just looking at what other people were doing, because obviously it's a community-driven thing."

COMMUNITY IS KEY

All throughout, people on both the English and Japanese sides of the community were bridging the language gap to share ideas. With many players unfamiliar with the typical structure of roguelikes, it helped to level the playing field between newcomers knowledgeable in the genre and experienced Splatoon players. The change in genre also encouraged some players to try speedrunning who had never previously attempted the hobby before.

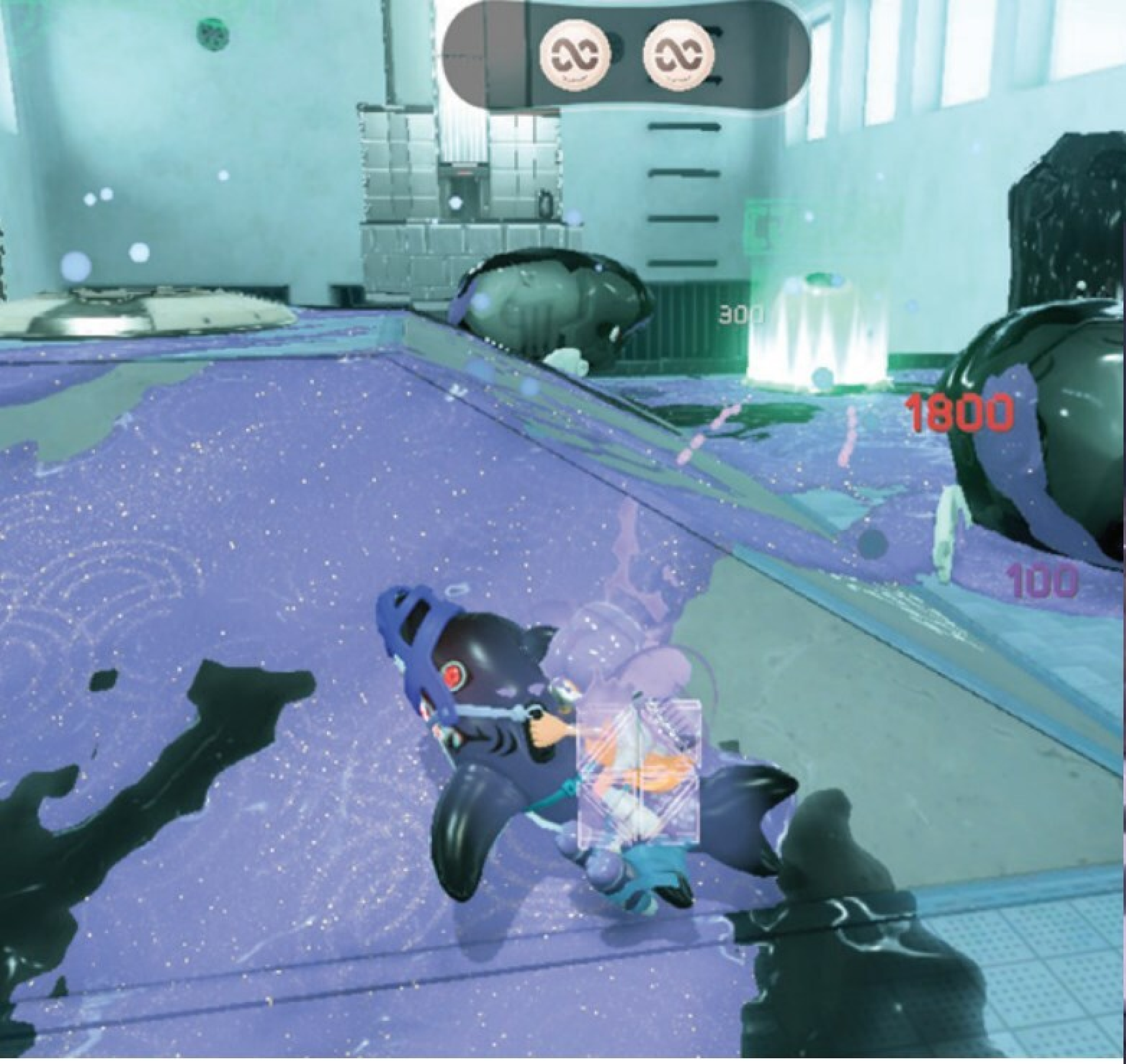
For Ari, who plays under the alias of Cradicles, Side Order was his first attempt at speedrunning after dabbling in the competitive multiplayer scene. As a fan of roguelikes and a specialist in the Splatana, he now holds the world record in New Game+ using the weapon. "It was because it was a roguelike and they're my favorite genre that I wanted to speedrun this game," he explains as I ask him about his motivations.

Yet without the community, he wonders if he would still be speedrunning and active in the community over three months later. "I really enjoy being around everyone in this community," Ari tells me. "I really enjoy just talking to other people about what they're trying to do with their runs, how they're trying to improve, new discoveries, things like that. I recently set up an All Palettes speedrun relay race with other smaller runners. I didn't have the tools to make it a big stream so it was just a small community event for fun, but I got to chat with other runners and have a good time with them."

Although Pick had previously been a speedrunner of titles like Celeste, they praised the community as a major factor in continuing to play Splatoon competitively. "If nobody else ran Side Order I probably would have stopped far sooner. I've never really been a boundary pusher or a big community contributor in speedrunning before Side Order, I would just run whatever game I enjoyed at the time. Side Order came at the perfect time for me with the perfect blend of interests and skills. It made me more active in the Splatoon speedrunning community since I could actually help to push the game further with them, and that community commitment kept me around and interested."

Of course, people want to achieve world records and find ways to improve their skills, but it's rarely a person's ultimate reason for continuing to play this game. Should that be a surprise? This is a hobby that traces its origins to 1990s niche web forums of people sharing Quake replay files to compete for the best times, and now some of the biggest gaming streamers and one of the largest gaming charity events in the world are dedicated to it. Across the approximately 30 years of this hobby's existence, communities coming together over a shared love for video games have been one constant in an industry of change.

Records and the headlines we often compartmentalize our discussions of this hobby within are merely one aspect of a hobby that means so much more than a title to those who take part in it.



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These are people who share their love for their favorite game by tearing it to shreds. Should it be a surprise that speedrunning is ultimately an act of love and community spirit above all else, something just as worthy of headlines as a new record?

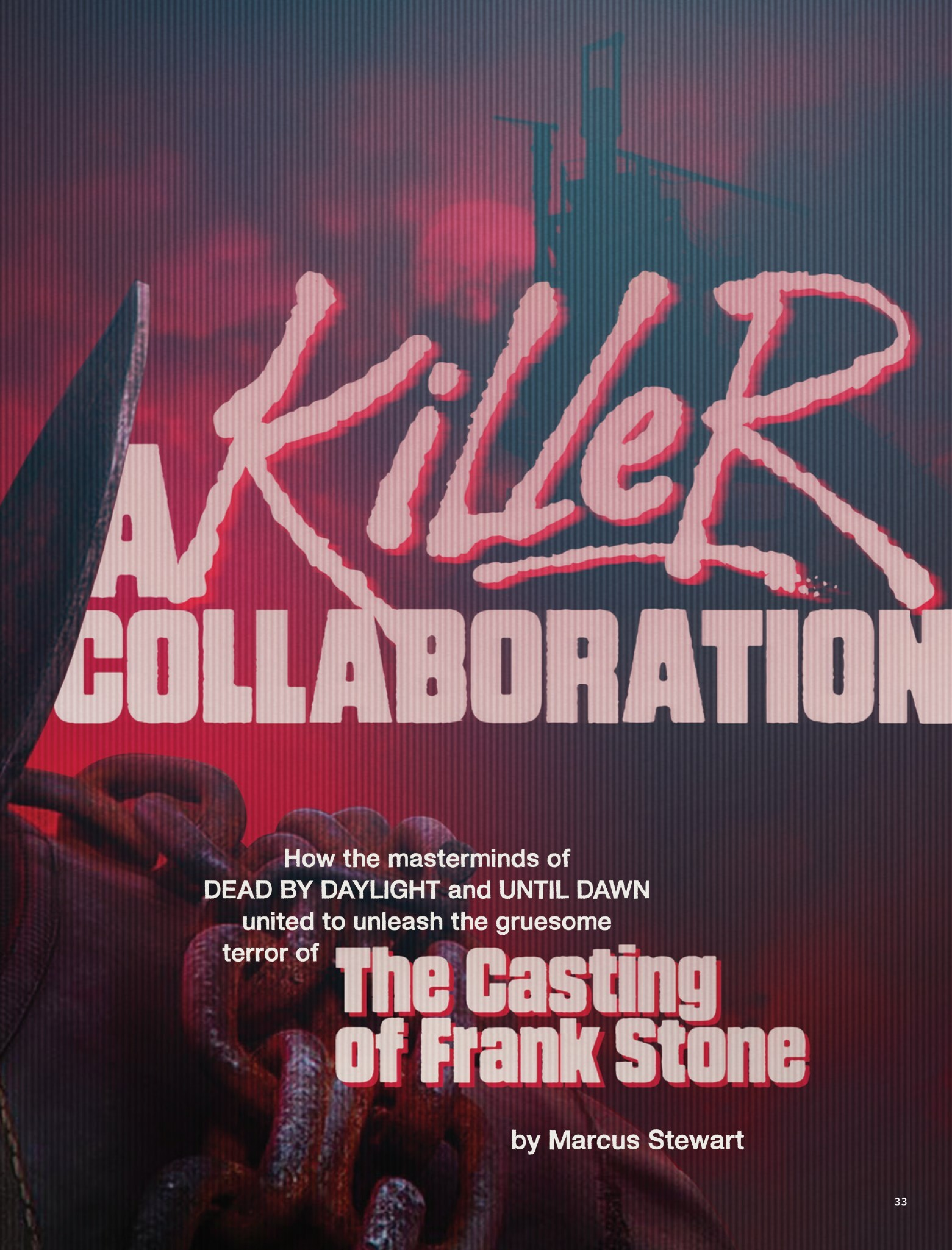
"This is the most inclusive community I've ever been a part of," Bee states with earnest sincerity instead of the laughter that accompanied their recollections of the trials and tribulations of Side Order speedrunning. Although she has since chosen to step back from active competition due to hand issues, she sticks around in this community because of the people who made her feel welcome, and who she says will likely remain friends long after Splatoon is no longer a major part of her life.

"There's a major zero-tolerance attitude – no racism, no transphobia, no homophobia," says Bee. "We are a community first, and that is welcoming on the internet. It's a little scary being a transgender speedrunner, but the Splatoon speedrunning community is full of so many passionate, loving, caring, and kind people who just want to talk about these games with you, then have a two-hour long discussion with you about why Splatoon 3 speedrunning sucks and why you should keep playing it anyhow!"

"I have made some of the best friends I'll ever make speedrunning these games," Bee continues. "We went to [American speedrunning event] PACE, and so many people from the Splatoon community from Canada to Florida to California were all sat in the same room playing Mario Party, and that is the most fun I've ever had and one of the fondest memories I have in my life. I don't think I'll be able to find a community like this ever again."

So, what is a speedrun? Speedrunning is a hobby defined by the community it builds around itself, a representation of the collective work of dozens of people in pursuit of a single goal. Speedrunning is also the hotel rooms playing Mario Party, the for-fun community relay races, the Discord chats, and the hours-long voice calls making Google Docs to help friends and strangers play a video game as fast as possible. Maybe you'll get lauded for your efforts, but who's keeping count?

Speedrunning is fun. Especially with friends. That's what a speedrun is. ■



A KilleR COLLABORATION

How the masterminds of
DEAD BY DAYLIGHT and UNTIL DAWN
united to unleash the gruesome
terror of **The Casting of Frank Stone**

by Marcus Stewart

DEAD BY DAYLIGHT is a BLOODY SUCCESS because it wholly fulfills the GRISLY FANTASY of every slasher flick ever made.

Whether hunting victims as one of its many powerful Killers or fleeing for your life as a hapless Survivor, the asymmetrical multiplayer game has delighted fans throughout its eight-year history (which you can read on page 42). In that time, a fanbase sprouted around the game's lore. The premise of a powerful malevolence called The Entity trapping ordinary people in an endless cycle of hide-and-seek matches with killing machines hailing from multiple universes and media franchises brims with intrigue. For years, fans have salivated over the idea of a single-player experience that fully taps into this well of background storytelling.

Developer Behaviour Interactive took these pleas to heart, but it didn't just want to put out just any single-player game. This experience had to do the brand, the fans, and the genre justice, even if that meant looking beyond its walls for help. Enter Supermassive Games, another studio that has achieved its greatest success through the horror genre thanks to titles like Until Dawn, The Dark Pictures Anthology, and The Quarry. Leveraging Supermassive's expertise in cinematic story-driven horror games, the teams crafted an original story set within the Dead by Daylight universe, The Casting of Frank Stone. We visited Behaviour's studio in Montreal to speak to designers from both studios and play the game's prologue to learn how this marriage of contrasting design philosophies is shaping up.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Behaviour Interactive **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games
RELEASE September 3

JOINING FORCES

Behaviour knew for a long time it wanted to create an experience that expanded the lore of Dead by Daylight (DBD) beyond in-game flavor text and, most importantly, the confines of an asymmetrical experience. As popular as the game is, Behaviour says a sizable section of its fanbase doesn't even play it but enjoys the universe vicariously through their favorite streamers and content creators. Multiplayer games aren't for everyone, and DBD's intensity and social cooperation are barriers for more laid-back or single-player-minded fans who enjoy the franchise's premise and vibe. Behaviour recognized this as an opportunity to create another doorway into this world.

Speaking to project leads at both studios – Behaviour creative director Dave Richard and head of partnerships Mathieu Côté, along with Supermassive creative director Steve Goss and executive producer Traci Tufte – Behaviour first contacted Supermassive in 2020. As Goss humorously recollects, the team didn't reply. At least not initially. But after eventually connecting, Côté describes the initial talks as "easy" due to how quickly both teams

understood each other as game designers and as mutual horror fans. It also helped that Supermassive has several passionate DBD players within its ranks.

"In our first meetings, it was clear that [Supermassive] already understood what is important in the universe, what are the rules of our universe, and how to interpret it in the best way to be able to represent a good story," says Richard. "So, very early for us, it was obvious that it was going to be okay."

This comfortability was a deal-maker. As Côté later adds, Behaviour spent years lovingly crafting DBD's characters and lore and is understandably protective of it as a result. Sure, it had already once given the keys to the franchise to Psyop, developer of the 2019 comedic KFC dating sim I Love You, Colonel Sanders! to create the similarly zany Hooked on You: A Dead by Daylight Dating Sim in 2022. That project helped Behavior open up to the idea of letting other creators reshape its biggest franchise, but Hooked on You also had the safety net of being a silly and, most importantly, non-canon experience. It could get away with anything. The collaboration with Supermassive was intended to be a serious, canonical story, which raised the stakes for success.

Despite positive first meetings, Goss points out the timing wasn't ideal to immediately begin a project. "We had a lot going on at the time," he says, likely referencing the then-ongoing releases of The Dark Pictures Anthology, which were launching at a yearly cadence between 2019 and 2021. The two parties agreed to revisit the conversation once Supermassive adjusted and cleared its schedule a bit. Behaviour was more than happy to wait.

"We could have gone with others," says Côté "There are other developers out there that are not bad at this kind of thing. But for us ... the whole Dark Pictures Anthology, I mean, Until Dawn is a staple of this type of game, like everybody knows about that game. And for us that play a lot of horror games, of course, we were familiar. So we're like, 'We really hope that we can have something like that for Dead by Daylight.' It was just a matter of being patient."

After about a year of waiting, Supermassive told Behaviour it was ready to go. Supermassive approached adapting the game's lore the way it leveraged real-world legends and myths for The Dark Pictures Anthology: take the core tenets and create something new with them. And DBD's strange lore (read more about it in the sidebar) offered an alluring storytelling potential. "There was a wonderful little moment in our discussion where, I forget who said it, [someone said] 'In this universe, this is a story, and in this universe, that story's a reality," says Goss. "And that was a moment of clarity around how we would do this."

As Richard notes, DBD has its own set of in-universe rules and parameters that Supermassive had to keep in mind. At the same time, Behaviour states that DBD's world is also very malleable and capable of producing many different stories – the franchise has shaped itself to fit IPs as disparate from each other as Saw is to Dungeons & Dragons. Richard also recognized Supermassive as a master at its craft and wanted to ensure the team had the tools and freedom to add its unique flavor.

While Goss echoes the desire to stay true to what makes DBD click, he also stresses the importance of telling a story that appeals to players unfamiliar with the game. Supermassive has its own dedicated fanbase that will flock to all its horror games, including The Casting of Frank Stone. That means that although it's set within the DBD universe, it must also stand alone as a good horror story. "I think the most important thing was coming up with a great story, a great experience for our players," says Supermassive's Traci Tufte. "And then being comfortable leaning into what is familiar, leaning into what people love about Dead by Daylight, while also balancing that

with the kind of gameplay and cinematic experience that Supermassive Games generally offer."

That means creating relatable, likable characters and a compelling – and terrifying – antagonist who feels at home within DBD's deep roster of Killers. For this reason, Behaviour and Supermassive decided to create a new threat in the murderer, Frank Stone. Goss explains that building a story around an existing Killer, like the Trapper, would be challenging. Fans love the Killers, so there's the pressure of doing them justice. But Goss says fans have already crafted their own fiction around these monsters and have an ownership the developers wanted to respect. "You don't want to kind of just cross that," says Goss.

A NEW NIGHTMARE

From a storytelling standpoint, Côté notes that another aspect cementing Behaviour's trust in Supermassive was discovering their shared horror movie inspirations.

"We were sort of shooting back and forth some references like movies and books and things, and no matter how sort of deep or obscure the references, most of the time it would be like, 'Oh, yeah, I know what you mean, like this part of that thing, right? Oh, yes, and this movie and this thing'. And it made for a very fun conversation, first of all, but also it built trust really quickly because we're like, 'Okay, we understand all the references that you're talking about, all the kinds of stories we want to tell, the sort of contrast that we like [...] so it's a good place to start."

The Casting of Frank Stone's inspirations ranges from the works of Stephen King to Steven Spielberg. Particularly, *The Goonies* (co-written by Spielberg) and, more crucially, J.J. Abrams' 2011 sci-fi coming-of-age film *Super 8*, which Spielberg produced, came up several times in our talks. *Super 8* may be the biggest touchstone, as, like that film, The Casting of Frank Stone centers on a group of bored youths making a movie.

The game's story unfolds during the summer of 1980 and centers on a group of teenagers – Christine "Chris" Gordon, Jaime (pronounced "Hi-may") Rivera, Linda Castle, Robert Green, and Bonnie Rivera – living in the quaint town of Cedar Hills, Oregon. This town would be completely unremarkable were it not for the previous atrocities committed by its resident serial killer, Frank Stone. The teens, who Goss describes as late high-school age, decide to work together on a filmmaking project and leave their mark on the horror genre. There's no better way to do that than to film a movie at the condemned Cedar Steel Mill. The title of their flick is *Murder Mill* due to the location's mysterious association with Frank Stone's crimes. As you'd expect, what starts as a fun film project goes awry.

Dead By Daylight's Lore Explained

Onlookers from the outside may only know Dead by Daylight for its infamous Killers and myriad cameos like Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, and the Xenomorph. Some are likely unaware of the narrative glue binding it all. Dead by Daylight is governed by a powerful and sinister force called The Entity. Described in-game as "evil in its purest form," this malevolent being invades worlds throughout the cosmos, plucking victims to trap in its realm. Sometimes, these chosen are already evil; others may be corrupted into committing horrific acts before they're taken. This is how its Killers are born.

The Entity's control over Killers varies by individual, but their purpose is to hunt and slaughter Survivors. These ordinary people stumbled onto corrupted areas and were pulled into The Entity, trapped for eternity with no memory of how they arrived. The Entity feeds on powerful emotions, whether that be the Killers' rage and bloodlust or the Survivors' fear, desperation, or hope. Thus, it pits both parties against each other in never-ending trials where Survivors must try to escape an arena before the Killer snuffs them all out. Regardless of the result, The Entity gets what it wants. Other elements are at play, but this is the gist.

Since The Entity can traverse various timelines across the cosmos, it explains the mishmash of various media properties. Leatherface, for example, is real in his world but is fictional to the Survivors. Since Dead by Daylight takes place inside The Entity, The Casting of Frank Stone represents an opportunity for players to see, for the first time, how The Entity forces its way into a world from the outside.

Behaviour and Supermassive are hesitant about sharing plot or character details. We don't know the main cast's personalities, but Goss describes the narrative not as a coming-of-age story but rather a "decisive-moment-of-age story." The teens are on the cusp of adulthood, enjoying what could be their last summer together – their final days of freedom before moving away to college or getting jobs. Making a film serves as a big activity they can all share.

From a gameplay perspective, The Casting of Frank Stone is a choice-driven cinematic experience in the mold of Supermassive's previous horror titles. Any character can be killed based on your decisions, whether dialogue choices or surprise quick-time events. However, while a character's demise is usually permanent in a traditional Supermassive title, the concept of death isn't as straightforward in DBD lore. When a Survivor dies, The Entity revives them, wipes their memory, and places them right back at the starting campfire to begin another trial. While that narrative conceit justifies numerous DBD matches, the studios tease that this concept will be explored and played with in The Casting of Frank Stone.

As such, the narrative can take many different directions, but Goss stresses that the breadth of outcomes is closer to Until Dawn's rather than The Quarry's staggering 186 endings. Like past Supermassive games, The Casting of Frank Stone includes the "pass the controller" couch co-op mode where you can make decisions and scream your head off alongside friends.

However, this familiar formula features several new twists inspired by the filmmaking premise and, of course, DBD. The teens' Super 8 camera is at the center, which serves as a central gameplay mechanic. Again, Supermassive is cagey about providing too many details, but Goss reveals that players can freely take out the camera and film everything, which unfolds in first-person view. It's a fully functioning camera (you can reload it, for example) and its capabilities evolve throughout the adventure; Goss even teases it may not be the only camera players use.

The camera is necessary for story and gameplay sequences and serves as the core intersection between the teens. Although the camera brings them together, it also becomes a point of tension. "If you've ever been engaged in a kind of a group creative exercise, people do try and vie for the leadership of the group," teases Goss.

When asked if the teens have special perks or talents, like DBD's Survivors, Goss is initially hesitant to respond before stating, "None of them are superheroes. They're absolutely normal kids who go through the most appalling experience and come out on the other side."

"Some of them", Côté coyly adds.

This is the extent of the main storyline details Supermassive and Behaviour are willing to share. However, I did sit down and play The Casting of Frank Stone's prologue, which takes place in 1963 and lays the foundation for the events to come.

A MISSING PERSON

After a cinematic intro scene, I play police officer Sam Green, who visits the still-operational Cedar Steel Mill in search of a missing child. A lead has brought him to this location, and I begin my search by questioning the mill's security guard, Tom. He's a friendly but drunkard old-timer who watches the mill with his dog and partner, a Doberman named Merlin.

I probe Tom about the kid's whereabouts, and the lines of questioning can steer the conversation in several intriguing directions I won't spoil. Sam's treatment of Tom and whether players acknowledge key environmental clues can open additional dialogue options and determine Tom's attitude and willingness to cooperate.

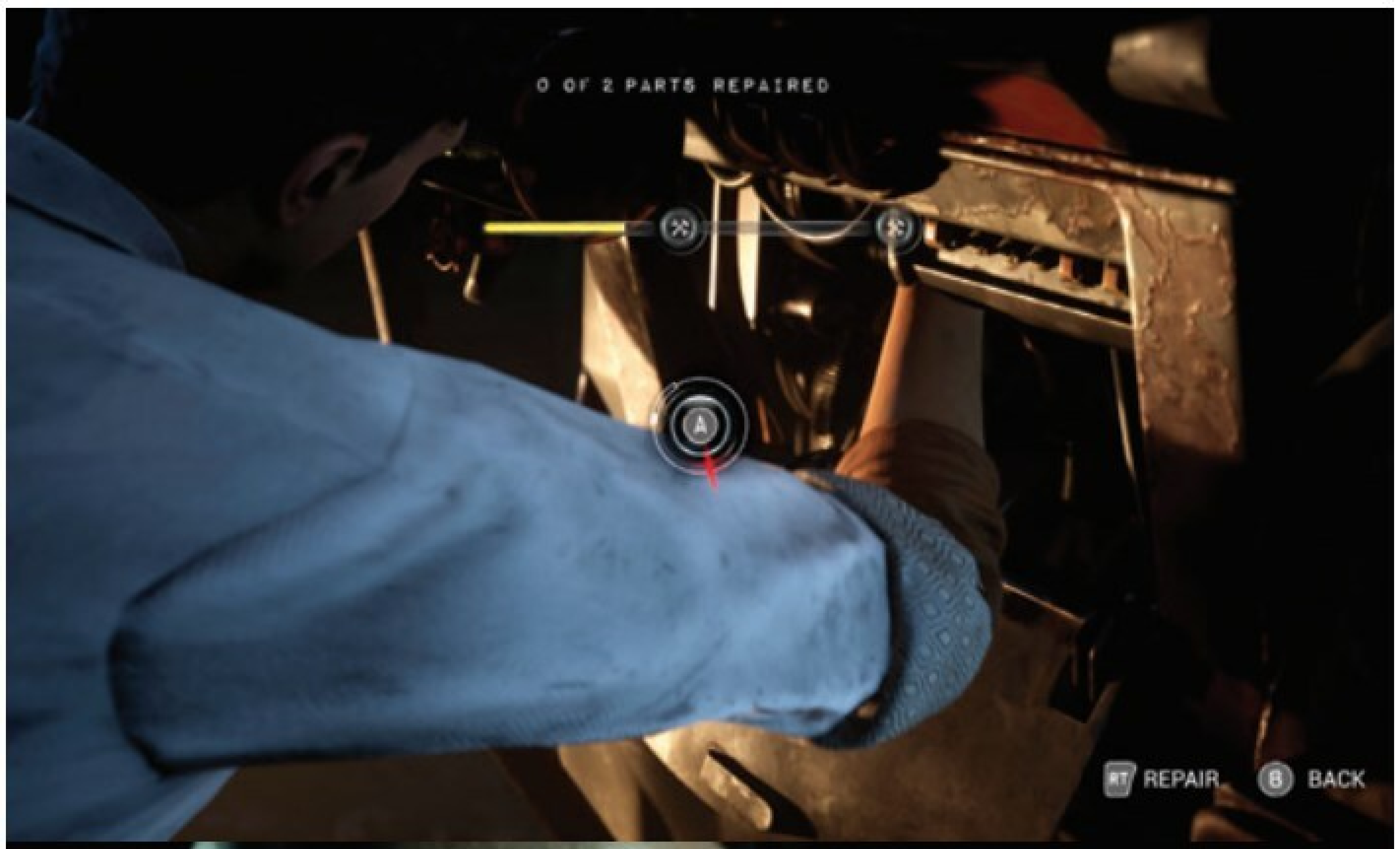
I freely explore the Steel Mill, which shifts from open spaces to a more labyrinthine network of corridors players can poke around to find hidden clues and helpful inventory tools. DBD-inspired flourishes are abundant, big and small. A DBD jingle plays when a new objective appears. Different types of collectibles draw direct inspiration from the game (Supermassive is keeping this secret for now), as does a revamped U.I. At one point, I move aside a pallet blocking a door – a clear nod to how dropping pallets hinders a Killer's pursuit in DBD.

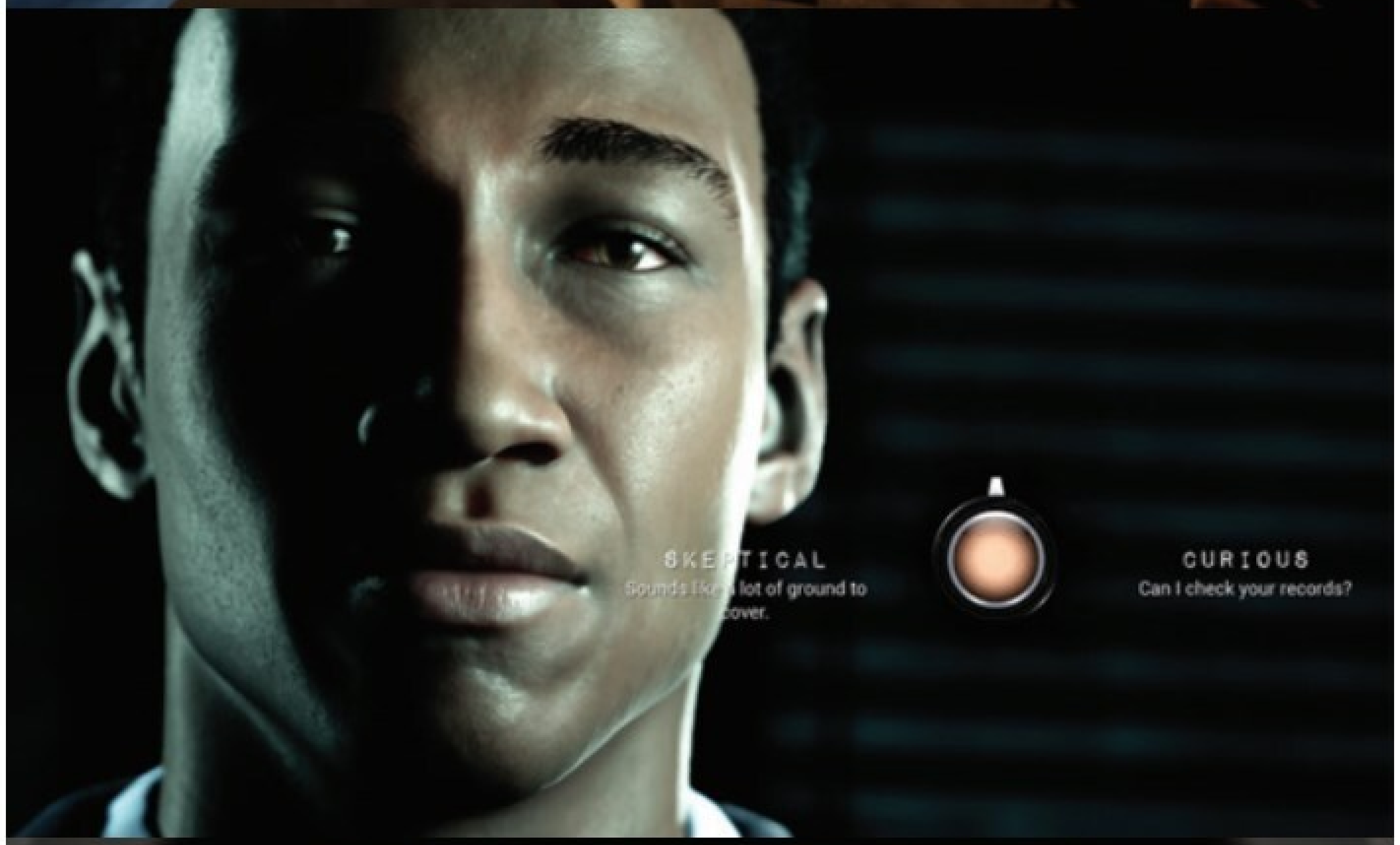
Most notably, some of Supermassive's traditional quick-time-event button prompts have been replaced by DBD's skill checks. For the unfamiliar, performing specific actions in DBD requires stopping a moving needle within a designated zone on a circular meter. That minigame is accurately replicated in The Casting of Frank Stone, adding even more tension and nuance to performing split-second saves beyond just hitting "X." Nailing the needle in the optimal zone results in the best possible outcome (relatively speaking). However, failing the minigame can lead to negative results, like a character sustaining an injury, which can affect future interactions.

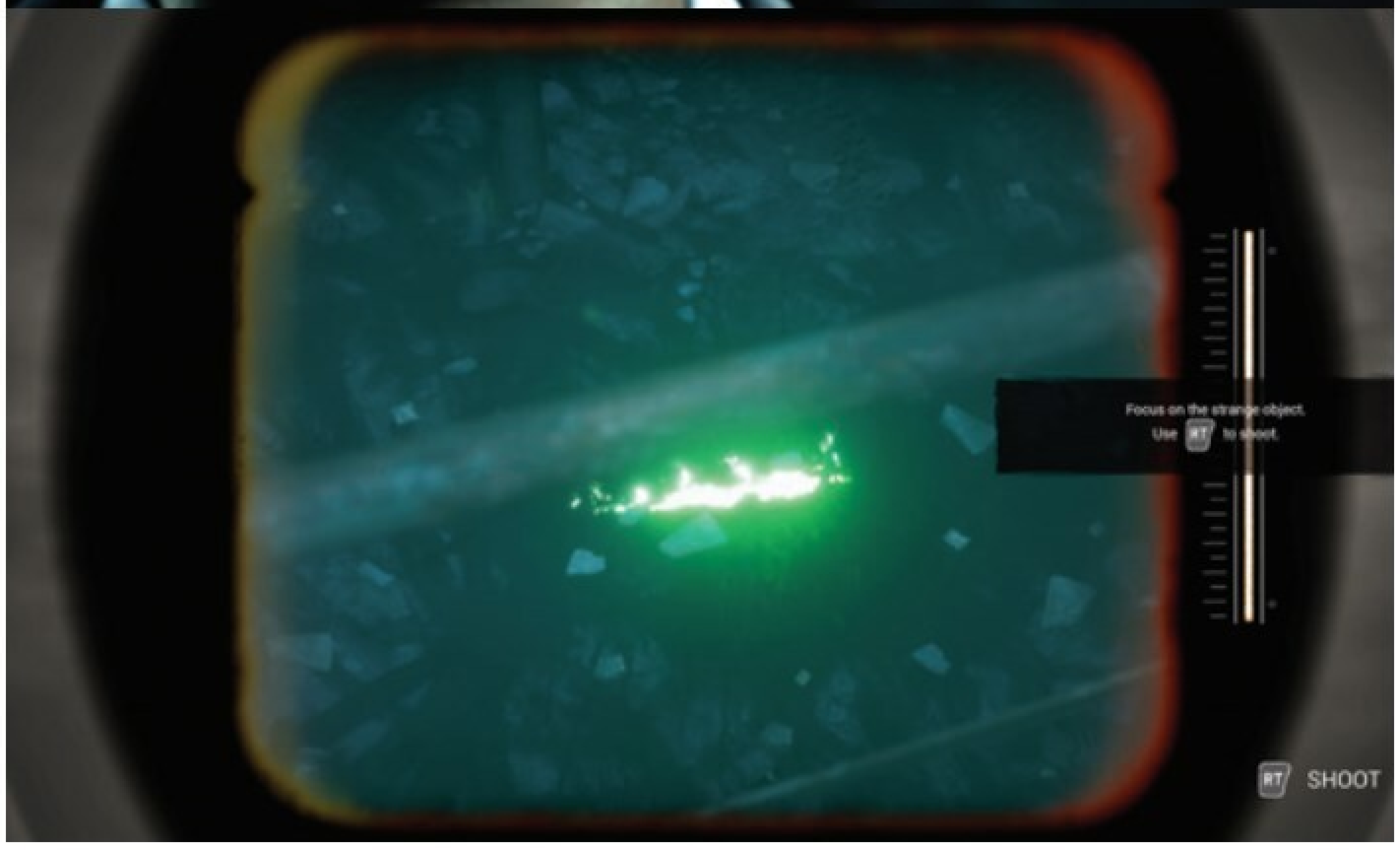
Supermassive used DBD's signature elements to create fun overlaps between the two gameplay styles and introduce ideas and mechanics the studios' cinematic games have never explored. For example, The Casting of Frank Stone features non-scripted AI character behaviors, contrasting the usually heavily scripted behaviors of Supermassive's works but bringing the game more in line with DBD's more systemic nature. Goss also teases more freedom in exploration and interactions.

"One of the first kind of creative conversations we had was, it isn't a Supermassive game, nor is it Dead by Daylight," Goss explains. "It's a thing of itself, and it has to bring all those threads together. For us, it's actually quite a freedom to take the rules that we had and generally tear them up and throw them away and go, 'Okay, what can we do here? How can we make that different? There are things which maybe appear to be quite traditional in a Supermassive way, but, again, I would like to put that out there, they aren't quite as straightforward. They have a different depth, and they have a different style and theme which will make them feel different and make them feel authentically Dead by Daylight. We've thrown away a bit of the rulebook in places."

The Casting of Frank Stone is fully developed in Unreal Engine 5 and looks great. Facial animations have subtle details like spit flying from mouths, and facial expressions have genuine emotions behind them. The exceptional lighting, thanks to its beautiful shadows, accentuates the great character models while contributing to the foreboding presentation.




SKEPTICAL
Sounds like a lot of ground to cover.
CURIOUS
Can I check your records?



While I wasn't particularly scared by anything in this initial segment, nor did I encounter any of the more substantial gameplay differences Goss referenced that make this feel distinct from Supermassive's previous horror titles, it's an effective tone-setter. For DBD fans, it's also the first offering of the many exciting references to that universe.

Given the various directions the narrative can take, Supermassive has made it easier to replay segments to see alternative outcomes. A new feature called the Cutting Room Floor opens after you've beaten the game (but will be available at the start for Deluxe Edition players). It displays the web of possible outcomes, locked and unlocked, of every narrative fork in each chapter and the number of collectibles you've found or can be found.

Every decision has a percentage number representing the number of players who chose it, and this statistic will continually fluctuate as more people play. You can replay any segment, preserving your choices from a previous section of the game and only changing later outcomes, and vice versa. Since some outcomes can only be experienced by making a specific combination of decisions, this seems like a great, streamlined way to witness the different story permutations and go collectible/achievement hunting without replaying unnecessary stretches or the whole game.

What Scares the Devs?

The Casting of Frank Stone is made by horror fans for horror fans. This begs two questions: which scary movies do the leads at Behaviour and Supermassive love the most? What horror trope or element frightens them more than anything?

Mathieu Côté (Behaviour Interactive)

Favorite Film: *Cabin in the Woods* (2012)

What Scares Him Most: "I think it's usually terrible people. The supernatural stuff I can deal with. But the terrible people who just are evil, not because they're possessed, not because of aliens, just because they're horrible people. It just gets to me."

Traci Tufte (Supermassive Games)

Favorite Film: *Scream* (1996)

What Scares Her Most: "When people are trapped. Like, buried alive, trapped in a box, and no one's coming."

Dave Richard (Behaviour Interactive)

Favorite Film: Can't decide but shouts out A24's horror films like *Hereditary* (2018)

What Scares Him Most: "Real loss of sanity. Again, not like possession, but there's some sickness. Brain sickness, insanity – that can affect anyone, and when they represent that well in film, I think that's truly scary because it can happen. It's really close to us, it can happen to anyone."

Steve Goss (Supermassive Games)

Favorite Film: Loves everything from 1930s Universal monster films, to '80s slasher flicks, to modern films. He found *Hereditary* "deeply, deeply disturbing."

What Scares Him Most: "To be honest with you, every Stephen King book ever written in hardback. I sometimes had to put those down because his characters are so convincing, and I feel so stressed for the characters he's created and the situations they're in, it's like, 'Nope, I just need to go and have a cup of tea.'"

A MUTUAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The Casting of Frank Stone allows DBD diehards and curious newcomers to explore the beloved universe at their own pace. Instead of worrying about teaming up with questionably friendly strangers online and pulling your weight, you can soak in the closest thing to a DBD movie.

"We've listened to our community, and they wanted a new experience in the Dead by Daylight world," Richard says. "A single-player experience is what they're after. I'm really excited to see how they find it."

As someone who's a bigger fan of Supermassive than DBD, I'm most curious to see how the game fulfills the studios' promises for a more unique and surprising experience. Until Dawn, The Dark Pictures Anthology, and The Quarry are enjoyable but adhere to a similar playbook. Goss consistently teases that The Casting of Frank Stone's story structure is "probably not what you expect it to be" due to the chaotic nature of DBD's universe.

Major studios rarely collaborate on a game in this manner, and the development has seemingly been a positive learning experience for both sides.

"It was really cool to see how Supermassive builds their games," Richard says. "Especially because our game universes are so different in terms of control and how we build up our horror. Horror is horror, and we're all building the same kind of experience for our players, what the type of feeling they're gonna' get. But it's really the level of control is so different. In DBD, it's just humans doing whatever they feel like. It's chaos, there's no control. And building that cinematic experience was fascinating."

"New audiences are interesting," Goss adds. "New voices in the game we make, new fans, what they take from it [...] and then doing that in a universe that's already a video game, it's kind of like a meta thing. You know what I mean? It's like a movie license. Oh, they're two different mediums; you can't do that in a film, you can't do that in a game. That's the tension you have. But here, it's like, 'But you can do that in the game. Dead by Daylight does that. Oh, you're right. Okay. We just need to turn that over and upside down'. And I'm trying to figure that out. So that kind of growing experience, we've taken a lot from it."

Behaviour, having been a work-for-hire studio for much of its 31-year history, got to be on the other side of such a relationship for once, which they say has been a lesson in itself. "We tried to be the client that we've always wanted to have," says Côté.

It remains to be seen how The Casting of Frank Stone will ultimately turn out, but if all goes well, DBD and Supermassive fans alike will have a common cause for celebration when the game releases on September 3. ■

Find more on The Casting of Frank Stone and its storied development at GameInformer.com/FrankStone

WELCOME TO
CEDAR HILLS

GENERATING THE Hook

How the developers of Dead By Daylight sunk their teeth into millions

by Alex Van Aken

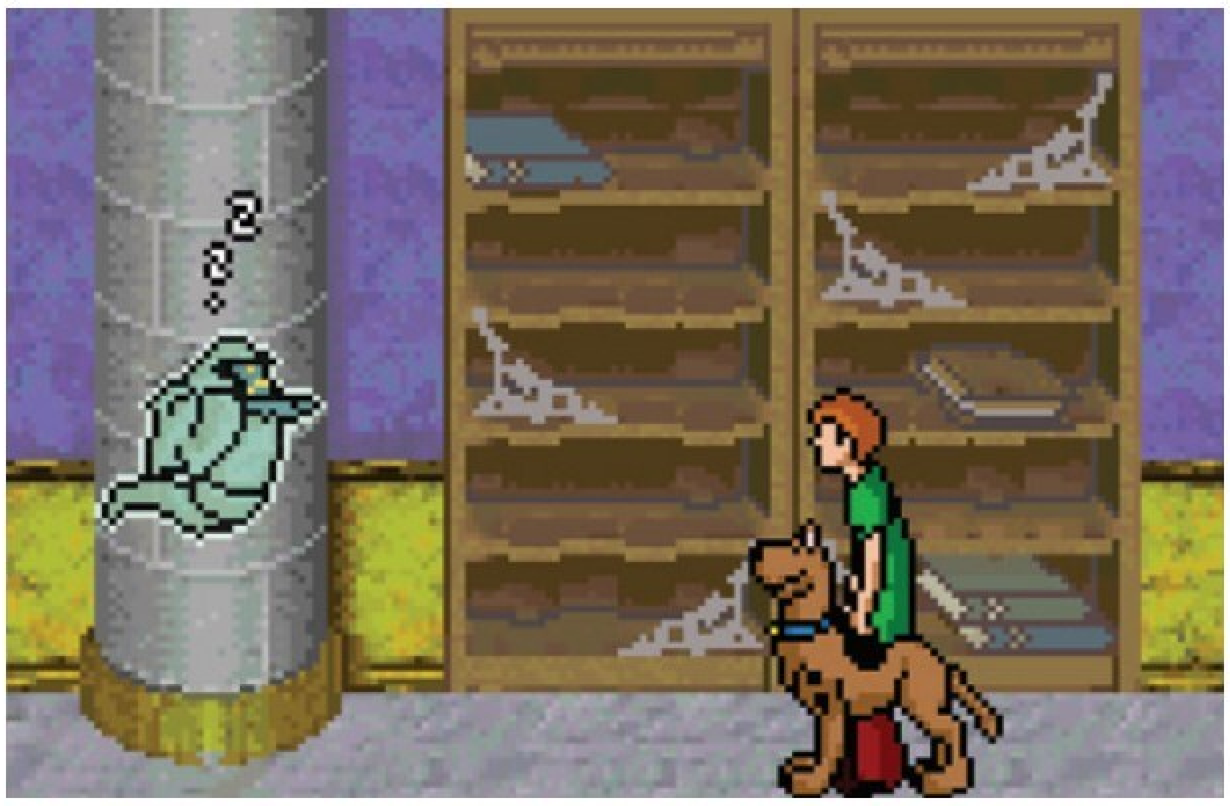
“WE LOOKED AT IT AND WE’RE LIKE, ‘OH S*** THAT’S GOING TO BE BAD,’”

Behaviour Interactive’s Mathieu Côté says, recalling his fear of being slower to market in the fledgling asymmetrical multiplayer genre. “I remember while we were making the original prototype, [Turtle Rock Studios] started saying they were going to release Evolve.“

Apart from scattered modes in series like Left 4 Dead or Splinter Cell, few multiplayer games provided the asymmetrical cat-and-mouse experience developer Behaviour Interactive aimed to deliver. Côté and his coworkers loved horror and believed they could explore the niche differently than the market’s current offerings. They had an idea for an original IP wherein players assume the role of a horror movie villain on the loose. This nascent concept eventually became what we know today as Dead by Daylight, a horror gaming staple that has attracted over 60 million global players since its launch in 2016.

Among the group was Dave Richard, a game artist who would become Dead by Daylight’s Senior Creative Director.

“I started my career here, [as] a pixel artist, working on [Game Boy Advance titles]. That was pretty fun. As a company, we’ve been work-for-hire for so long, so I had the opportunity to work with a lot of licenses like Scooby-Doo, Monster House – I’m naming the more horrific ones,” Richard jokes.



“In Scooby-Doo [...], we managed to do little rooms that were quite mysterious and spooky for kids. I love that feeling in non-horror games. You get into these rooms, and it’s raining. There’s a mood, and it’s mysterious. I’ve always loved horror, so that was cool,” Richard continues. “And at some point, I transitioned to game design because that’s what I always wanted to do. The first game I designed was Monster House, a really fun Zelda-like game on GBA.”

Richard cut his teeth working on various contract projects during his early years, eventually meeting a few cohorts, including Côté, who eventually became Dead by Daylight’s head of partnerships. The crew began pitching original games more often, subsequently developing Naughty Bear: Panic in Paradise, a downloadable follow-up to 2010’s Naughty Bear, a dark comedy action game Richard also helped to design.

“Our job was to make the games that were being given to us, but we had our own ideas,” Côté tells me. “And the joy of work-for-hire is that once in a while, you have downtime, at least a little bit. [...] And that’s how [new projects] happen.”

Dead by Daylight matches up a team of four players, playing human survivors, against another person controlling an overpowered villain, aka the Killer. The group must attempt to escape the Killer’s clutches by opening the arena’s exit doors that imprison them. To successfully escape, the Survivors must activate a series of generators while narrowly avoiding a gruesome end. If the Killer lands enough strikes on a Survivor, they can hang their prey on a hook, killing any player not rescued in time. This terrifying concept has captured the minds of millions, making it one of today’s top-played multiplayer games.

However, with few resources and no publisher secured, the Dead By Daylight team endured humble beginnings.

A KILLER IDEA

According to Côté and Richard, the prototype featured a one-on-one format in which the Survivor had four lives and could regain them if they successfully returned to their dead body. Crucially, the team lacked a developer with networking knowledge, so they installed a piece of cardboard on their monitors to prevent screen peeking.

"The original prototype was created in Unity super fast by one person who was not a programmer," Côté tells me. "[They] put it together with hope and bubble gum."

According to Côté, this person still works at Behaviour but prefers to remain anonymous.

"Actually, it was pretty similar gameplay-wise. [...] The basic loop was there," Richard adds.

Dead by Daylight's flagship villain, The Trapper, was merely a large blob in the demo, while the Survivor was Unity's generic starter character asset wearing different T-shirts. The generators, which are crucial in every match, were primitive 3D cubes with a simple mini-game.

"There was a pig," Richard laughs. "Just a pig running around."

Not to be confused with "The Pig," the nickname of one of the playable Killers, this ordinary pig served as a gameplay mechanic to confuse the Killer into thinking a Survivor was close by. The team still talks about adding it to this day.

Around this time, the Dead by Daylight developers finally played Evolve, the 2015 multiplayer title competing for space in the asymmetrical niche. The team discovered valuable lessons while playing Evolve, but to their surprise, these learnings highlighted several pitfalls they wanted to avoid.

"They released Evolve, we played it, [...] and we're like, 'There are a few great [examples] on how not to do things in here," Côté recalls. "The game sort of switched in the middle, right? You were the prey, and then you became the predator. [...] The four survivors had fixed roles; you needed one of each. And we thought, 'Okay, we don't want to do that.'"

"They reversed the fantasy," Richard chimes in. "These were all things we steered away from."

The team quickly decided to improve the project and bring it into Unreal Engine, involving folks like Fadi Beyrouti and Marc Salha, Dead by Daylight's technical director and original art director, respectively. A visual style began to take shape as the artists aimed to create organic and distorted buildings, with impossibly long planks of wood forming the landmarks. A tile system, still used to this day, allowed for elements of randomization – building placements, generator locations, and exit areas – to complement the map's larger, static points of interest.

The team implemented network play as Behaviour began staffing the project, suddenly playing full-screen at their desks. The player count increased from one-versus-one to four-versus-one, with the additional users controlling their own Survivors. Notably, the studio already experimented with this format while developing Naughty Bear years prior.

"Very few people know this," Richard teases. "There is a multiplayer mode in the first Naughty Bear where you can play four-versus-one. One player is Naughty Bear, and four others are just normal bears. It's called Jelly Wars, and your objective is to get jellies and put them in a mixing machine. And Naughty Bear is just trying to kill everybody. It's always been something that was a powerful fantasy for us and that we wanted to work with."

THE ROAD TO LAUNCH

"Most people we showed it to were excited and thought we had something. But very few publishers wanted to get involved," Côté says. "And most of them told us not to do horror. 'Nobody buys horror unless you're Silent Hill or Resident Evil. Don't even try. It's not worth it.' [...] Very few people believed in it until we met Starbreeze."

In 2014, Behaviour Interactive entered into a publishing agreement with Starbreeze Entertainment, a company that helped bring the Payday series and Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons to market.

"Starbreeze was the only publisher who offered to get in business with us and allow us to keep the IP. To us, that was critical." Côté says.

While Behaviour purchased the publishing rights years later, Starbreeze's marketing support was crucial to Dead by Daylight's initial success. A few months before launch, Starbreeze advised engaging players at events like PAX and E3 and collaborating with streamers, which were pivotal for early success.

"'You need to have a PAX booth and show people your game. You need to do these things and go on Twitch to interact with content creators. Find a couple of stupid friends with a YouTube channel and give them the game so they can [make] a video. Don't tell them how to make the video; just let them do it,'" Côté says, imitating the advice Starbreeze gave them.

"We gave a very rough beta build to three or four YouTubers; they had followings. They made a video [and] showed it to us before they released it. And we're like, 'They're not scared. They're just having fun and laughing with their friends. This makes our game not serious, right? No, no, it's right. [...] They're having a good time.'"

According to the pair, PAX attendees were forming lines around the booth by the end of the convention. The title wasn't even out, yet streamers were already requesting features. At this moment, the staff knew they had something good on their hands.

Despite the positive reception, tensions had grown between Starbreeze and Behaviour over the project's core framework and how players would queue into matchmaking as Killer or Survivor.

"In the first iteration, a play button was in the middle [of the screen], and we had non-stop arguments with Starbreeze about it," Côté recalls. "They said, 'Put a play button there. [...] We'll [route players] into the side that needs people right now.'"

But Behaviour was adamant that players should play whichever role they desired, so much so that it considered having separate executable files for Killer and Survivor to load into whichever side of Dead by Daylight they'd want to enjoy. Starbreeze was worried there wouldn't be enough Survivors to balance matchmaking, but the development team argued that people love to be frightened and it wouldn't be a problem. Ultimately, the bet paid off, and Behaviour sold over one million copies in its first two months, surpassing the projected 400,000 lifetime sales from the external firm it hired.

"The plan was: we launch, we make our money back, and then we all go back to making the next game that Behaviour works on," Côté says. "We immediately realized that was not going to happen. We were between Overwatch and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive [on Twitch]. And people were saying, 'Overwatch is better.' And we're like, 'Yeah, it is. 500 people worked for 3 years on it. It's been 3 of us for about 18 months.' Players saw us on the same level, which was amazing, but the bar was high."

"We had to step up, fix [bugs], and add features. We were patching almost every other day. Then, we started creating new content and DLC. And we've never relented on that. It was a breakneck pace from the get-go. It was exhausting."

WELCOME TO HOLLYWOOD

The team released its first update two months after launch, introducing a teleporting villain called The Nurse. However, the passionate crew had much higher aspirations for Dead by Daylight's second chapter in October. They wanted Halloween.

"Behaviour has been making games for about 30 years, so we have contacts in the movie business. A lot of licensors knew our name already, which opened a couple of doors," Côté says. "We were lucky enough to get in touch with the right person,

Reality Check

While I sense a genuine concern for employees from head of partnerships Mathieu Côté and creative director Dave Richard, Behaviour Interactive leadership has laid off up to 140 total employees since January.

In a June press release, the company cited pursuing a "clarified vision" as a core reason for its most recent downsizing. In the same statement, the company noted its work-for-hire business and Dead by Daylight as the two foundations that have grown the company from 575 to 1,300 employees over the last five years.

"Over the same period, the greater gaming industry has also witnessed remarkable growth," the release states.

I've asked Behaviour Interactive's representatives about these inconsistencies, which aspects of the business declined, how it's handling retained staff, and if it's made substantial efforts to fill the 47 job vacancies posted on its external career page at the time of my visit.

While we understand an official statement is likely to come, *Game Informer* did not receive it before this issue's printing deadline. We will publish relevant updates online at GameInformer.com.

Rand Marlis, who runs the catalog that owns [the rights to] Michael Myers. He's old-school Hollywood but understood what we were trying to do. [...] It was a harder sell, and I had to push, but we explained we were building a love letter to the work, and having Michael Myers in the game was a great way to legitimize what we were doing. The character would live on in a new form and reach a new audience."

Côté's pitch resonated, and nearly three months after launch, Behaviour released its first premium DLC for the title, featuring Michael Myers, Laurie Strode, and a map set in Haddonfield, the New Jersey township where the movie takes place. The event was a huge success, emboldening the team to continue pitching to licensors. The team scaled from roughly 30 employees at launch to over 100 within Dead by Daylight's first year.

"This was a special moment in the licensing world because we signed Nightmare on Elm Street, Saw, and Leatherface almost simultaneously," Richard adds. "We had a lot on our plate at the same time, and [although] we proved ourselves with Myers, we were trying [to make] something special."

THE HUSTLE NEVER STOPS

In the following years, Dead by Daylight has enjoyed continued success, largely thanks to its staunch fanbase, encouraged by the game's ever-growing roster of original characters and licensed personas from pop culture horror entertainment. Behaviour has continued collaborating with massive horror brands, including Stranger Things, The Ring, Resident Evil, Silent Hill, and Castlevania, the latter releasing later this summer.

According to SteamDB, a popular gaming analytics tool, Dead by Daylight attracted 84,046 peak concurrent Steam players this past June – over eight years after launch. This number doesn't account for other platforms, including console users. Considering this exhausting content calendar, I ask Côté and Richard if the team's work-life balance has improved and, if so, what measures are in play.

"We don't have an overtime culture or anything," Richard says. "We're working hard. We're passionate, pushing as much as we can, but then we go home."

"Overtime, for us, is a failure of management," Côté firmly states. "I've always been extremely adamant about that. [...] We launched in 2016 with a team of 30 people. And I have to say, as the project producer, maybe ten people worked overtime to launch it. And they all took time off after we launched."

The two leads say they've slowed down the cadence of new content these days, and the team doesn't release new collaborations for at least 9 to 12 months following a partnership agreement.

I ask Richard if he's worried the well of content is at risk of drying up. After all, how many characters can they feasibly design before running out of new ideas? The energetic director pushes back at the question, confidently stating that horror entertainment is in a golden age and creators are releasing inspiring art, ripe for crossovers, all the time.

Eight years into the journey, the two developers champion Dead by Daylight as a recurring destination for all horror fans, as if it's an anthology of the genre's best offerings. They certainly make a compelling case. ■

ALM FOR ONE

How Visions of Mana plans to honor the series' legacy

by ***CHARLES HARTE***

ONE FOR CALM

THE MANA SERIES OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES HAS NOT HAD A NEW MAINLINE ENTRY IN OVER 15 YEARS, BUT IS FAR FROM DEAD

Between the Collection of Mana in 2017, which brought the first three games to Switch, and the remakes of Secret of Mana and Trials of Mana in 2018 and 2020, respectively, the 33-year-old franchise has seen an active couple of years. Now, Square Enix plans to harness that momentum to finally release a brand-new entry.

During The Game Awards in December of 2023, Visions of Mana was finally revealed to the public, marking the series' first original non-mobile entry since 2007. While the remakes of Secret of Mana and Trials of Mana were fueled by nostalgia and a desire to polish cherished games of the past, Visions of Mana is a bright, modern take on the world, with a fresh premise and flashy combat system. A lot has happened since the last entry in the Mana franchise, so we spoke with some of the developers of the upcoming game to fill in the gaps.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix, Ouka Studios **RELEASE** August 29

BUILDING THE PARTY

Series producer Masaru Oyamada doesn't have an exact idea of when the new game's development timeline began, but he says a key part of the process overlapped with the development of the Trials remake.

Around the time Square Enix was working on recording the orchestral arrangements for the soundtrack of the Trials of Mana remake, Oyamada approached Hiroki Kikuta, the 1995 game's original composer, about writing a song for a potential new entry. There was very little to go off, however; according to Kikuta, "This was a situation when there was not even a single file that [existed] about Visions of Mana. There was absolutely nothing." Nevertheless, he composed a piece that captured his interpretation of the ideas Oyamada shared. That piece not only exists as the game's title track, but since it was one of the earliest pieces of development, it influenced creative conversations and the overall tone of the game.

In addition to Oyamada, those conversations were led by the game's pair of directors, who work for Netease's Ouka Studios, which is partnering with Square Enix to develop the game. These directors are Kenji Ozawa, who has worked primarily on China-exclusive Dragon Ball games, and Ryosuke Yoshida, known for his work as a combat designer on Devil May Cry 5 and Monster Hunter Generations.

Meanwhile, I also speak with the rest of the music team. In addition to Kikuta, who primarily composed the title theme and scored cutscenes, the music was written by Ryo Yamazaki, who focused on scoring the open world, and Tsuyoshi Sekito, who primarily worked on battle themes.

I ask the trio about why large modern games typically hire composition teams rather than individuals as it was done for the original Mana games.

Yamazaki says the situation has pros and cons: he misses the personal touch individually composed soundtracks can have but admits it's nice to have a person with a clear vision "steering the ship" to keep the project balanced. The three also wholeheartedly agree that the sheer volume of music just isn't feasible to tackle alone – Oyamada chimes in to say that Visions of Mana has double the amount of music as Trials of Mana's remake, which also had all three musicians on its sound team. As we speak more about the new game, I sense that this increase in scale is true across the board.

SOULS AND SWORDS

Like the games in the series before it, the story of Visions of Mana is a standalone adventure, but it borrows the essential elements that make a Mana game a Mana game. The titular Mana Tree needs to be rejuvenated every four years by Alms, special people selected to give up their souls. When Hinna is chosen to be the Alm, her best friend, Val, is chosen to accompany her as Soul Guard.

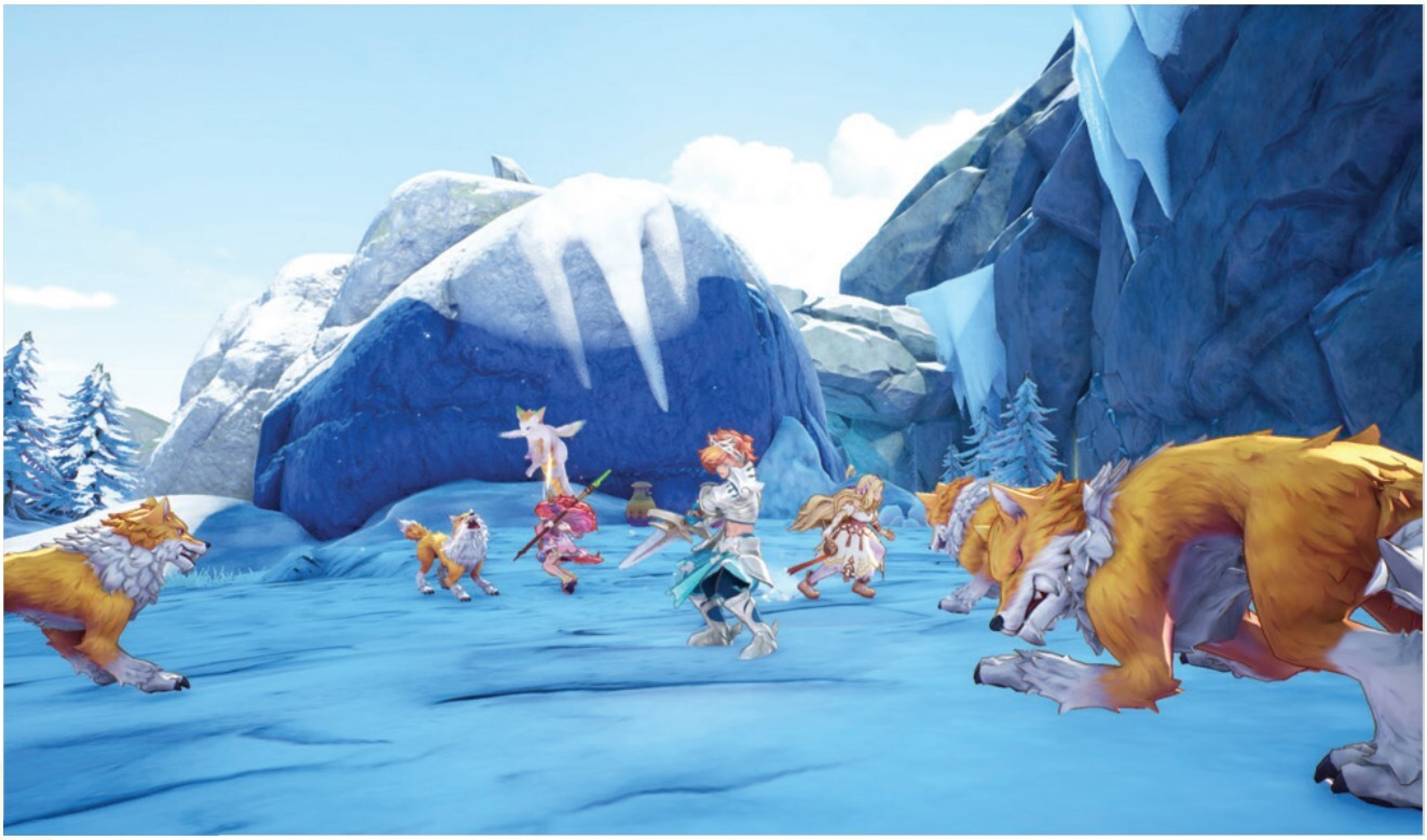
Val is the starting protagonist, but there are five playable characters total: the one-winged Dragonfolk warrior Careena, the cat-like Beastfolk swordsman Morley, the noble Queen of Illystana Palamena, and the plant-like Sproutling Julei. It's a diverse cast of fantasy species, which Ozawa says is by design. When the team designed the map of the world, he says they picked spots where particular creatures would live based on the surrounding geography and then reverse-engineered a party member's character design from each species.

Each character also has a different approach to combat, with other available weapon types and attack speeds; for example, Morley attacks in quick bursts, while Careena uses magic for support and offense. These playstyles are augmented even further when using elemental vessels, which give players corresponding abilities. The moon vessel, for instance, can create large magic bubbles that slow time for any enemies stuck inside, while the wind vessel creates pillars of air that blast enemies skyward.

"When it comes to utilizing these elemental vessels, it kind of allows the user to be able to have the freedom to think about what they want to do," Yoshida says through a translator. He says that basic attacks are primarily executed by pressing a single button, so the variety in combat comes from elemental vessels and other special attacks.

Combat is also spiced up when you add supporting companions, side characters who temporarily fight alongside the player at specific parts of the story. Yoshida says the ephemeral nature of the encounter intentionally aligns with the game's themes about learning to say goodbye to people encountered on your long journey. While he says, "many different characters are going to appear in the game as companions," only three have been revealed so far: Ramcoh (who fights alongside Careena), a mysterious character named Aesh, and surprisingly, Val's companion Hinna.

When I first watched trailers for the game, I assumed Hinna, with her central role in the story, would be playable, but she's not. The game revolves around a group of "chosen ones," yet the player character is just someone tasked with guarding one of them. When I ask the developers about this, they speak cautiously to avoid spoilers but say they're ultimately most interested in leaning into the trope of the loyal guardian. Alms are very important and potentially powerful characters, so someone tasked with defending them would have a very unique journey. They imply Hinna might have some different role later in the story, and I'm eager to see what that looks like.



THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Visions of Mana is a linear, story-driven game, but since it's a fully 3D modern title, Ouka and Square Enix wanted to give players some space to roam. But when the team of developers discussed creating an open world, they encountered a hurdle. The map Visions takes place on has a wide variety of climates, biomes, and environmental diversity, and translating that into an explorable open world would be challenging to do at the scale the game was produced. As a compromise, Visions of Mana is advertised as an "open field" game – there are places to roam and explore, but it's not a seamless, interconnected space like players might find in other games.

"It would be hard to kind of express all these different geographical regions within one large continent," Oyamada says. "That's kind of why [we] decided to go with the middle ground where there is that linear progression that happens where characters can explore different areas and geographical regions, but there's also the open world feeling that is captured through a very dimensional environment, as well. It's kind of like taking the best of both worlds."

Yoshida chimes in to say that traversing these large areas will be easier with a host of ridable companion creatures. "In the series' past, there have been different companions that you ride to traverse the ocean as well as the sky, but there hasn't been a companion that you can utilize to actually traverse the land. So that was definitely another thing that [we] wanted to be able to incorporate with this game." The example shown in past trailers is an extremely cute dog-like beast that Val and Hinna can be seen riding on in cutscenes and the open field.

The world's size also means the development team can be a little more attentive to detail when building it. "Rather than having a very, very expansive world that isn't as enjoyable to explore," Yoshida continues, "[we] really wanted – even if it is kind of semi-open – to be able to really intricately create each area so there's something worth exploring in all these different areas too."

A VISION OF SOUND

As players explore these open fields, they'll be accompanied by the game's soundtrack, and Yamazaki largely handled this part of the score. I expect a broad artistic answer when I ask him about his approach to music and what makes a good video game soundtrack. Instead, he explains what he sees as the utility of music in video games.

With the advancements in modern graphics, he explains music isn't needed to convey as much information because the player can see details clearly on the screen. Weather and environmental details, for example, are much easier to convey now than in the SNES era. Still, the role of music is to fill in the gaps between the game and the player. "When it comes to music composition, it's important to be able to capture something beyond what users can see on a screen," he says. "It's important to present that little bit of something extra to the players." This is most often the world's tone or its inhabitants' emotions.

Sekito further simplifies this idea: "The most important thing is that [music] needs to be a signal, first and foremost," he says. Rather than a passive indicator of the world around the player, he views it as a call to action; music should tell players when to fight, be cautious, or relax and explore.

I enjoy hearing composers' philosophies on music, so I'm intrigued when both Sekito and Yamazaki tell me that, upon first meeting Kikuta, they were taken aback by his approach to the craft. While they each had different stories about their initial encounters with the man, they both called his thought process "very deep," with Sekito even saying, "[I'm] unsure if [I've] ever even thought that deeply about the music in the way Kikuta-san has." When Yamazaki joined the Trials of Mana remake music team, he was able to look at Kikuta's original score from the 1995 game and was left with a "very intense, strong impression." Yamazaki says, "This type of music is something that only this person can probably create."

With so much hype and mystique built around him, I was curious to see how "deep" and "intense" Kikuta would answer my question about his approach to music. Luckily, it's a rather comprehensible approach, even through a translator, though it's certainly easier said than done.

"[Video game music] needs to be music that you don't get bored of, no matter how long you listen to it," he says, noting games can take dozens of hours to complete. "But at the same time, good video game music needs to also be memorable and needs to leave a strong impression in the hearts of the players. And so in a way, these two facets of game music seem to sort of be at odds with one another [...], and it is a very challenging thing to sort of have to strike a balance between." Kikuta says he's very proud to have struck that balance in the past.

THE LEGACY OF MANA

While reflecting on the legacy of Mana as a whole, Ozawa notes that, despite the thematic throughlines between games, one of the franchise's greatest strengths is its versatility between entries. The stories are unconnected, so every game is a singular experience, and players can jump in at any point.

There's a new art style, 3D graphics, fully voiced cutscenes, an open field structure, and a fully orchestrated soundtrack, but none truly set Visions of Mana apart from its predecessors. A new, unique, standalone game is par for the course, and this latest game fits right in with the last 33 years of history. Here's hoping that when Visions of Mana comes out on August 29, it lives up to that legacy. ■

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AVOWED

A pillar of strength standing on its own

For years, developer Obsidian felt it was always a bridesmaid and never a bride, but it was one of the best bridesmaids in the industry. Games like Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords and Fallout: New Vegas were critically successful but struggled to stand beyond the shadow of their established predecessors. In the last few years, however, games like Grounded and Pentiment have proven what we've always known: given the opportunity, Obsidian can create compelling, original games based on its own worlds.

Avowed is in an interesting position where it does exist within a world Obsidian has already established in the Pillars of Eternity universe. But, considering the excitement surrounding the game and its more widely appealing genre (first-person fantasy action RPG), this will likely be the first time many experience it. "First and foremost, you don't have to have played any of the prior Pillars games to play Avowed," game director Carrie Patel says. "We expect that for many players, Avowed is going to be their first introduction into the world of Eora, and we're accounting for that." Avowed takes place after 2018's Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire and will feature some returning characters, but they will exist more as fun cameos.

In fact, speaking with Patel, the better point of reference for Avowed isn't the previous Pillars games but Obsidian's 2019 sci-fi game, The Outer Worlds. "I think that gives a much clearer idea of the scope of the game and also the design and layout," Patel says. Tonally, however, Avowed stands on its own. Outer Worlds often bordered on comedy – a sadly increasingly accurate parody of a consumerist society in the future, but Avowed is much more serious. Patel describes it as having a grounded political story with "a very kind of weird and esoteric, metaphysical, and divine story beneath that. A lot of moments of seriousness, but also moments of levity to kind of break that up, and a lot of those things are very character-based." From its announcement, the game was compared to Skyrim, primarily because it was a first-person fantasy game, but Obsidian pushes against that. "I don't love it because a lot of players can take whatever they want from those games and go, 'It's gonna have this and this and this,'" gameplay director Gabe Paramo says. "I prefer if we just explain what it is our game is doing."

And to that point, keeping The Outer Worlds comparison in mind, Avowed is less open-world, more large connected zones; less one-person army, more party-based. You will create and control your primary character and build a party as you explore. Throughout the game, you will meet four companions who travel with you and populate your camp. You will see those characters interact and build a relationship with you and each other, and when it's time to venture out into the world, you will take two with you. Some quests require speci-fic companions, but for the most part, you can choose who you'd like to bring with you. Just don't expect love to bloom on the battlefield.

"I think if you're going to invest in romance, everyone who's writing them needs to be absolutely, fully bought in," Patel says. "And the other thing you need to do is make sure that if you're going to provide that path, that you're balancing that with an equally meaningful and well-developed, non-romantic path because you never want players to feel that, 'Well, the only way I really get to know this character or really get to form a meaningful bond with them is if I commit to romancing them, which maybe isn't something I want to do.'"

We have faith in Obsidian to create an interesting world full of compelling characters. The studio has done it before, so the big question mark left with Avowed is how it feels. The team unquestionably calls it an RPG, considering how you explore the world, meet characters, and make dialogue choices. In one instance, we saw the player bypass a boss entirely through discourse decisions, but the combat is fast-paced. "When you do get to the combat portions of things, it is very action-oriented," Paramo says. "But the pacing is probably what you would expect from fantasy action RPGs." We're eager to try the combat later this year to fire spells from our hands and hit monsters with swords. Obsidian's taking a big swing and walking down the aisle, and we're rooting for its success. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment
RELEASE 2024

LEGO HORIZON ADVENTURES

A refreshing rebuild

As a longtime fan of Lego bricks and Lego video games, I was as shocked as the rest of the world when I heard about Lego Horizon Adventures. Not only is it the first dedicated Lego title to directly adapt a video game rather than a movie or broad media franchise, but it's a game that plans to do so in collaboration with the original creators – Guerilla Games – including the full voice cast. Between my curiosity about the game and enthusiasm for Legos, I was thrilled to get some hands-on time this year at Summer Game Fest.

When you think of a Lego game, you probably think of one developed by TT Games sometime in the last few decades, like Lego Star Wars, Lego Harry Potter, or Lego Batman. Lego Horizon Adventures is similar, but its gameplay is distinct in several ways, likely thanks in part to it being made by a new developer.

For starters, the aesthetics showcase a total commitment to the Lego style. In TT's games, basic environments would be modeled to look real (like grass or mountains, for example), with only destructible or otherwise significant items made of Lego. But in Lego Horizon Adventures, every inch of the game is modeled from Legos – even the water is a current of translucent blue studs. Character animations are also more Lego-like, with their arms and legs moving in rigid swings, making the game look more similar to something like *The Lego Movie* than Lego Star Wars.

My demo opens with a cutscene, which tells a shortened version of the early story of Horizon: Zero Dawn. It's fully voiced but rewritten to be goofier and more concise, and liberties are taken with the characters' personalities. While regular Aloy is determined, focused, and relatively chill, Lego Aloy bursts with enthusiasm, jumping for joy when Rost gives anything resembling good news. It feels like a good-natured parody, especially because the original writers and actors are retelling the story.

The actual gameplay is also quite different from that of past Lego games. Structurally, it's a similar mix of combat and light puzzle solving, but the combat system is much deeper. Characters level up to upgrade their health and damage or gain other benefits. Arrows loosed through open flames catch fire and can ignite nearby foliage to reveal hidden secrets. Walking into tall grass even activates a stealth mode; this is useful for targeting machines' weak points, which remains a core piece of combat. And enemy health bars are significant – though my time with the game was far from difficult, it did require some strategy to come out on top.

After completing one of the first prologue missions, the demo takes us back to Mother's Heart: Aloy's hometown and the game's central hub area. It's a lovingly crafted recreation of the vibe from Zero Dawn, but what struck me is how many customization options there are. In Mother's Heart, you can walk up to buildings and choose to completely swap out parts of them for designs from other Lego properties, like Lego City, Lego Friends, or Lego Ninjago. It would take some work, but it's feasible for someone to transform the whole town's buildings into a completely different design, which is extremely charming.

Characters can also be customized similarly, with dozens of alternate outfits from the Horizon series and other Lego properties. If you want your Aloy to be in a giant hot dog suit for the whole game, nothing stops you. It's a mechanic I can see kids enjoying, especially since goofy customization is half the appeal of Lego.

I never expected Lego Horizon Adventures to exist, and even after knowing all about it, I never could have anticipated how the game looks in action. It's a wild swing for the Horizon series, but I can't help but smile at it. I expect it'll be a hit with kids and adults alike when it comes to PlayStation, PC, and – surprisingly – Switch this holiday season. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Guerilla Games, Studio Gobo
RELEASE 2024

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

The chase is on

Monster Hunter is known for its protagonists overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds in their pursuit of taking down the massive monsters that populate the region, but with Monster Hunter Wilds, Capcom may be taking it to a whole new level. I recently attended an extended gameplay demo involving an Alpha Monster hunt and left the session excited to dive into this seemingly improved take on what the very popular Monster Hunter World delivered in 2018.

Monster Hunter World served as Capcom's big push to make a more mainstream and globally appealing entry in the franchise. The team worked hard to bring the franchise up to global triple-A standards and included several quality-of-life improvements, a simultaneous ship date across Japanese and Western markets, and additional language localizations. The result was a smash success, with Monster Hunter World currently sitting atop the franchise's sales charts. Capcom and the Monster Hunter development team hope to go even bigger with Wilds.

"For Monster Hunter Wilds, it's pretty much a similar approach to what we have accomplished with World in that we want to use what were then the most high-spec machines available to create the world of Monster Hunter in unprecedented detail and depth," series producer Ryozo Tsujimoto says. "That was true for Monster Hunter World, and for Monster Hunter Wilds, it's the same approach, but now, hardware has advanced so much in the intervening years that we're just able to go even further than we did in that direction."

The demo I see showcases noticeable graphical enhancements, including lush environments, improved animations, and better faces. While you ride around on the larger mounts in this entry, you can use a new tool to pick up distant items while on the mount. After reaching the eponymous wilds (with no load screen), the character chooses a target – the Alpha Doshaguma – and builds a mobile camp with the help of some Palico friends. After cooking a meal and feasting, the hunter is off to find the Doshaguma.

Using the Ghille Mantle, the hunter sneaks past the standard monsters and up to the Alpha. He lands a heavy blow, and all chaos breaks loose. The giant bear-like monster alerts all its buddies, and they swarm the hunter in the enclosed space. The hunter must thin the herd, so he leads them on a chase through a savage gauntlet, including other monsters' territories, quicksand traps, a cave with falling rocks, and even a dynamic lightning storm with the area's Apex Monster lying in wait. After a drawn-out, thrilling chase, the target, who is now alone, begins limping, but the hunter also needs to rest, so he lets the injured monster escape.

The hunter returns to the mobile camp, changes to a long sword, and sends up a signal flare to call co-op partners. Together, they set up traps in the area where the monster roams. One hunter lays a pitfall trap while the others prepare in their own ways. Once ready, our main hunter sneaks up on the Doshaguma and sets up explosive barrels near where it's sleeping. The hunter blasts the barrels, and they explode, serving as the rudest alarm clock.

It wakes up, understandably irritated, and chases the hunters once more. The main hunter leads it into the pitfall trap, where it gets wedged in the ground, and the team unloads on the already-injured beast. The Doshaguma climbs out, but the main hunter jumps on its back, grabs its mane, and begins stabbing it from the top. Thanks to this maneuver, the pre-existing injuries from the thrilling chase, and the teamwork from the co-op partners, the Alpha Doshaguma finally falls, and the hunters use the carving knife to cut the carcass.

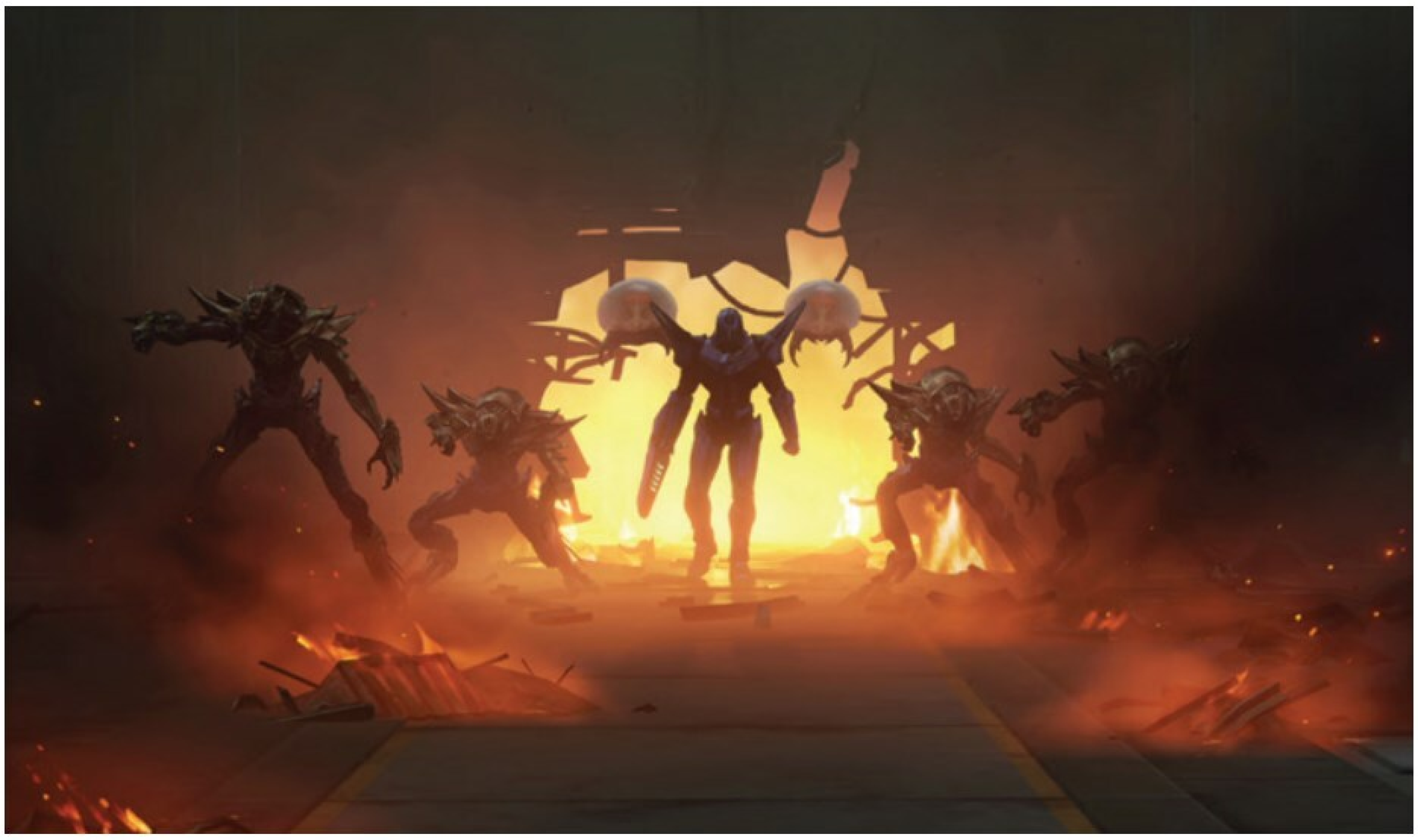
When Monster Hunter World arrived in 2018, I was excited to finally give the series a shot. I liked what I played but didn't make it far into the campaign. After leaving my Monster Hunter Wilds demo and speaking with the creators, I'm ready to download World and its Iceborne expansion in anticipation of Monster Hunter Wilds' 2025 release.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** 2025

METROID PRIME 4: BEYOND

Samus versus Sylux



The long-awaited next entry in the Metroid Prime series has had an uncomfortable trajectory. Announced in 2017 with only a logo, Nintendo confirmed that Retro Studios, the team behind the previous three Metroid Prime games, was not developing number four. However, in 2019, Nintendo announced that Prime 4's development was restarting with Prime originators Retro back at the helm. It was bad news for fans eager to play Samus Aran's next adventure as the announcement represented a significant delay, but good news for fans of the studio and its previous Metroid work.

The game has felt like vaporware in the five years since its announcement. It was announced, but all that officially existed was that seven-year-old logo. Recently, Nintendo finally offered a significant update on Metroid Prime 4 and revealed its new subtitle: Beyond.

In the footage, which appears to show all gameplay, Samus Aran lands in her ship at a new location called the Galactic Federation Research Facility. Though redesigned, her ship is reminiscent of the vessel she flew in Metroid Prime 3: Corruption. In the Metroid timeline, the Prime games occur between the original NES game and Metroid II on the Game Boy, and fans are theorizing Beyond takes place in the same general zone.

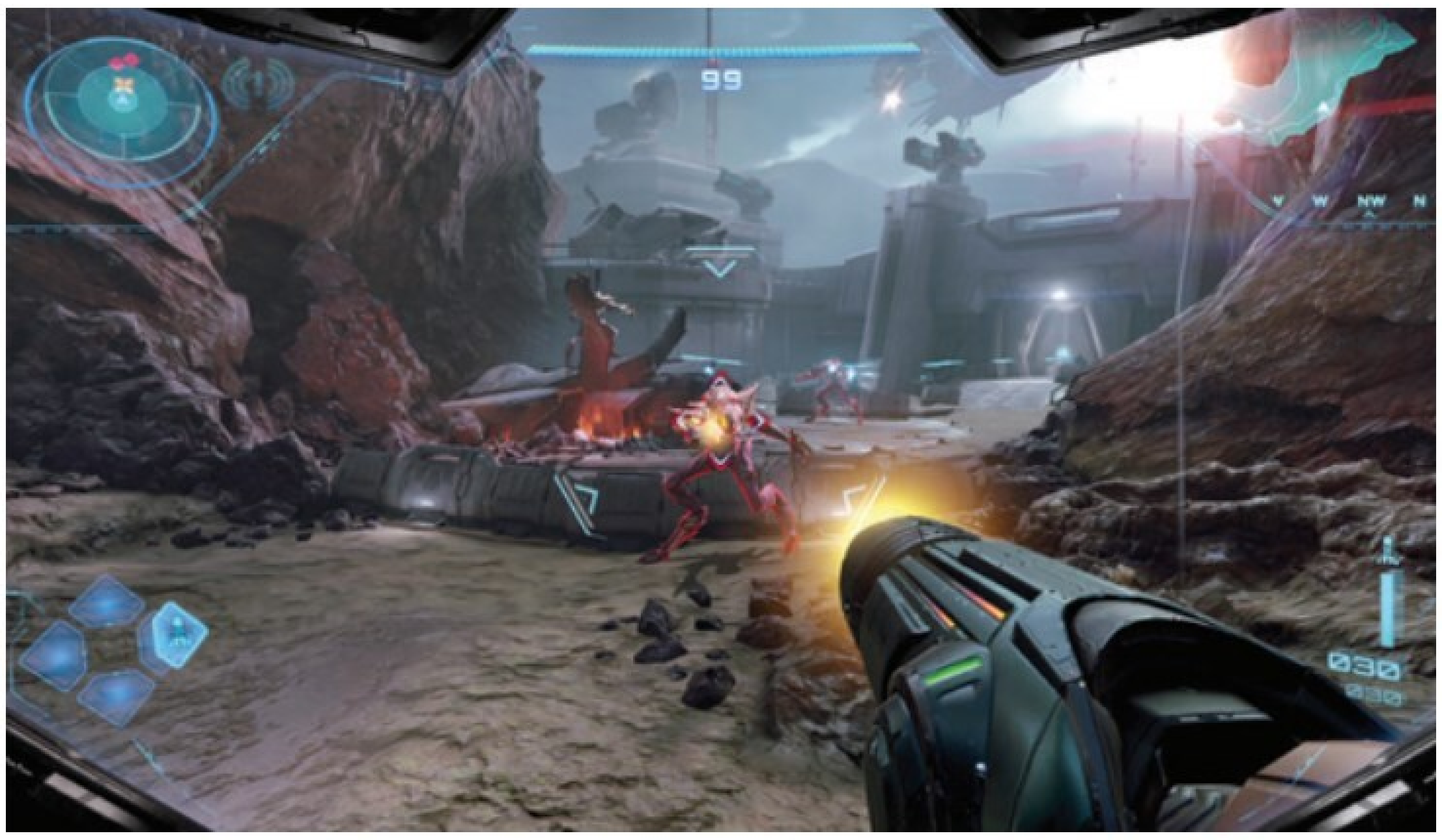
Much of that timeline conjecture is from one of Beyond's more interesting lore reveals. After Samus lands on the planet, emerges from her ship, and the camera iconically zooms into the back of her head, she is seen exploring a planet clearly embroiled in war. She has familiar abilities like transforming into a Morph Ball and scanning the environment, but the camera moves beyond her to focus on what appears to be the game's antagonist flanked by two subservient floating Metroids. Though not officially confirmed, the presumed villain is Sylux, a competing bounty hunter first introduced in the DS game Metroid Prime Hunters. Sylux also appeared in Metroid Prime 3's special ending and the 3DS' Metroid Prime: Federation Force.

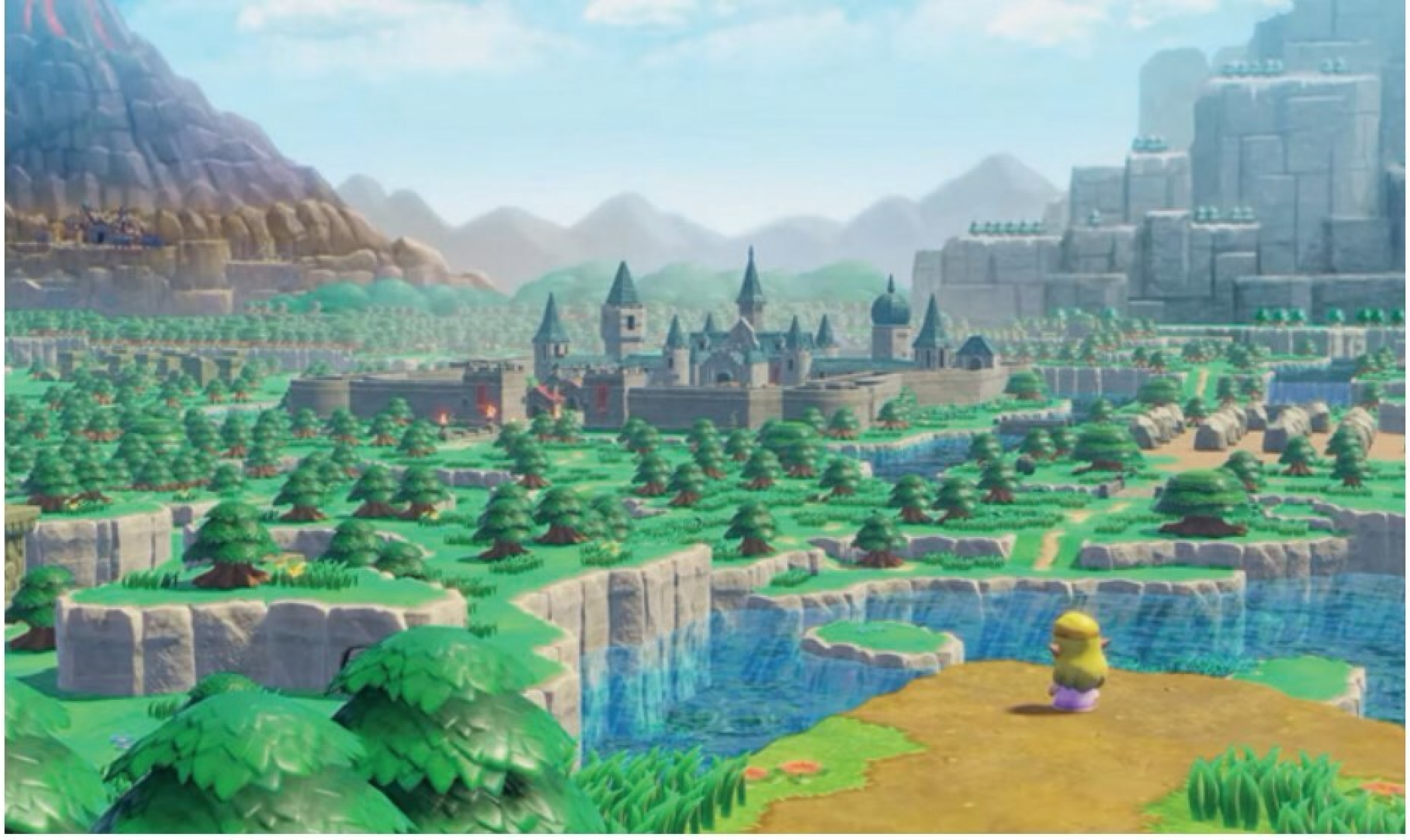
Little is known about Sylux beyond the fact that they hate the Galactic Federation, with whom Samus has always had an uncomfortable alliance. Their promotion to a more prominent character and potential primary antagonist is a long time coming. It's also assurance that Metroid series curator and producer Yoshio Sakamoto takes Metroid's lore seriously and appears to be working towards a larger story.

Of course, the most exciting part of this Beyond news is that it feels like a real game again. We've now seen it in action, and though our peek was brief, it inspired confidence that it will be a proper continuation of the series that expertly brought Samus into the world of 3D. Alongside the war-torn indoor environments, the game footage teased a lush outdoor environment with friendly animals and gigantic trees.

We're not entirely without questions at this point. The game is slated for a vague 2025 release, which makes us wonder if a version of the game will also launch for Nintendo's Switch successor console, which we don't know anything about beyond Nintendo confirming its future existence on a financial call. In any case, we have waited this long. What's a few more months? **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo
RELEASE 2025





THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: ECHOES OF WISDOM

A missing Link

Despite being the titular character in one of the most popular gaming series, Princess Zelda has yet to star in a video game (assuming you don't count the CD-i games – and we're not going to). Sure, she's appeared in Super Smash Bros. and is indirectly playable in The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks, but she's never been the main character, front and center on the box art. To our surprise and delight, that dream is coming true, thanks to Nintendo's recent reveal of The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom.

As the trailer opens, its art style is the most immediately noticeable element. The cute character models and distinctly glossy textures are clearly based on the Link's Awakening remake released in 2019, leading many to quickly (and incorrectly) assume this was another remake. But as Link is whisked away into a mysterious portal, only Zelda is left on screen. In a world without Link, saving the day is up to her.

Accompanied by a fairy named Tri and armed with a Tri Rod staff, the princess's gameplay differs slightly from Link's typical sword-swinging quests. Instead, Zelda can create Echoes, copies of objects or creatures she's encountered on her journey, to solve puzzles and defeat foes. The first example they give is a table, which Zelda can use to climb to higher areas, but the line-up of available Echoes quickly grows into surprising territory, including trampolines to bounce from, meat to lure enemies, and blocks of suspended water to swim through.

Zelda can also make Echoes of enemies who will fight by her side in combat. Just like with objects, they start relatively simple – you can use Moblins to battle Chuchus, for instance – but the Zelda series has a multitude of monsters, and many of them can fight by your side. Deku Babas, Lizalfos, a wind-up Octorok, and even the horrifying ReDeads are fair game to recreate.

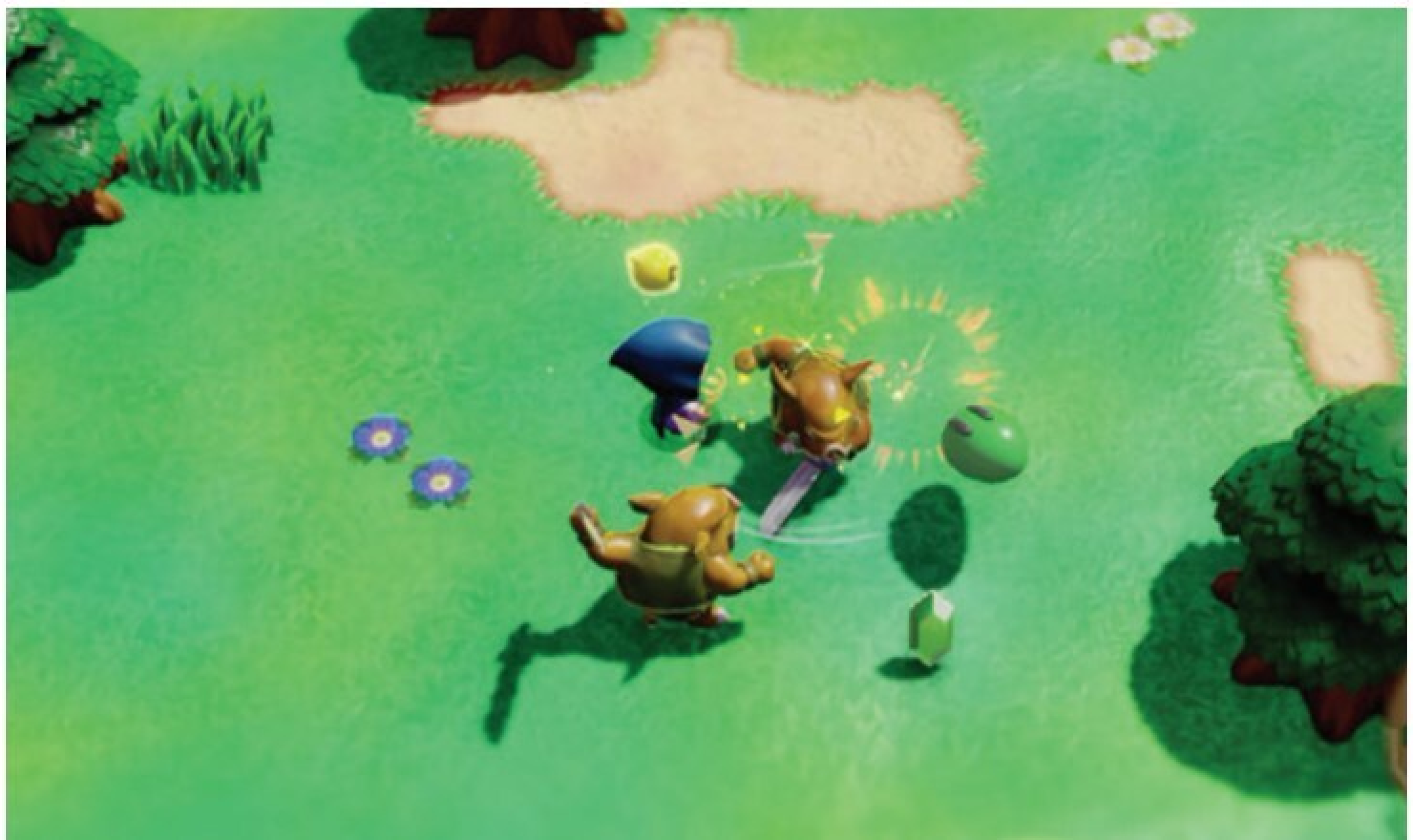
It is currently unclear what the limit to this ability is, though some hints are in the trailer. The fairy Tri has four golden triangles floating behind them, and every time Zelda creates an object, it appears to use one of those triangles. A table only takes one, but most enemies seem to take two, and the ReDead takes three.

We also don't know what determines whether or not an enemy or object can be made into an Echo in the first place, but it seems to be basically everything, which would mean there's a staggering total number of Echoes in the game. It seems even Nintendo is unsure of how many there are; in the announcement trailer, series producer Eiji Aonuma says, "There are a lot of Echoes in this game. To be honest, I haven't counted them all yet."

The other intriguing facet of the game is its world-building. While the reveal trailer only tells us the absolute basics of the plot, eagle-eyed viewers will notice a conspicuous level of crossover with other Zelda games. The art style resembles the Link's Awakening remake, but the overworld Zelda explores seems to be the same Hyrule as seen in A Link to the Past and its sequel. In the opening, Link's wearing his tunic from A Link to the Past, but he's also wearing the Hylian Hood, an accessory introduced in Breath of the Wild.

Meanwhile, characters typically exclusive to certain 3D games are present in this 2D trailer, including Gerudo people, the Great Deku Tree, and even someone who looks like Zelda's caretaker, Impa. We also see two sets of Zoras talking to each other, one modeled after the design found in A Link to the Past and the other modeled after Ocarina of Time. I'm particularly excited about that crossover, but I must wait until the game launches later this year to see it myself. Luckily, September 26 is only a few weeks away. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo
RELEASE September 26



CONCORD

Hero shooting stars

Last month, PlayStation released the first big look at Concord, its upcoming 5v5 multiplayer hero shooter from Firewalk Studios, a team it acquired last year. Though the cinematic introduction might have teased something like a single-player, narrative-driven heist game akin to a *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie, the gameplay footage showcased the strictly multiplayer experience in a new light. Admittedly, this reveal left me feeling blase; it looked fine, but not necessarily something I hadn't seen before. However, after playing Concord for a few hours during a recent preview event, I'm excited for more of the action, which feels like a mix of Destiny and Overwatch, even if I'm wary of the team's emphasis on lore and storytelling paying off in a multiplayer-only format.

Before going hands-on with Concord, Firewalk director of IP Kimberly Kreines and lead gameplay designer Claude Jerome walk me and my peers through a presentation to highlight the game's sci-fi world. Kreines explains Firewalk set out to make something "unlike anything out there today": a multiplayer experience that feels tactile and visceral, "like taking an action game and bashing it with a shooter," and characters that feel real. She explains that players control various Freegunners in Concord, together in an outlaw crew of mercenaries taking jobs that play out in the game's multiplayer matches.

There's plenty more that speaks to the amount of character work, world-building (like map graffiti and props that tell of a recent rebellion, skyboxes that warn of incoming storms, and a sprawling Galactic Guide map), and lore Firewalk is attempting to inject into Concord off the rip. It's clear the team wants its players to have an affection for these Freegunners the same way the Overwatch community does with its heroes. Throughout my time with Concord, though, I pondered the idea that a developer can intentionally create these player/hero bonds. Overwatch certainly has it, but Blizzard has earned that over years of work, with incredible gameplay at its core; it didn't try to force players to love its cast with copious lore entries, a massive library of universe mythology, and more. Fortunately for Firewalk, a 5v5 multiplayer shooter doesn't rest its laurels on

lore and storytelling – it's about the gameplay, and so far, Concord feels great.

Destiny is the closest comparison I can make, especially regarding its time-to-kill (TTK), map layout, first-person handling, and match progress. Though I was surprised to feel this, I probably shouldn't have been. At least four of the game's leads worked on Destiny 2, and it shows.

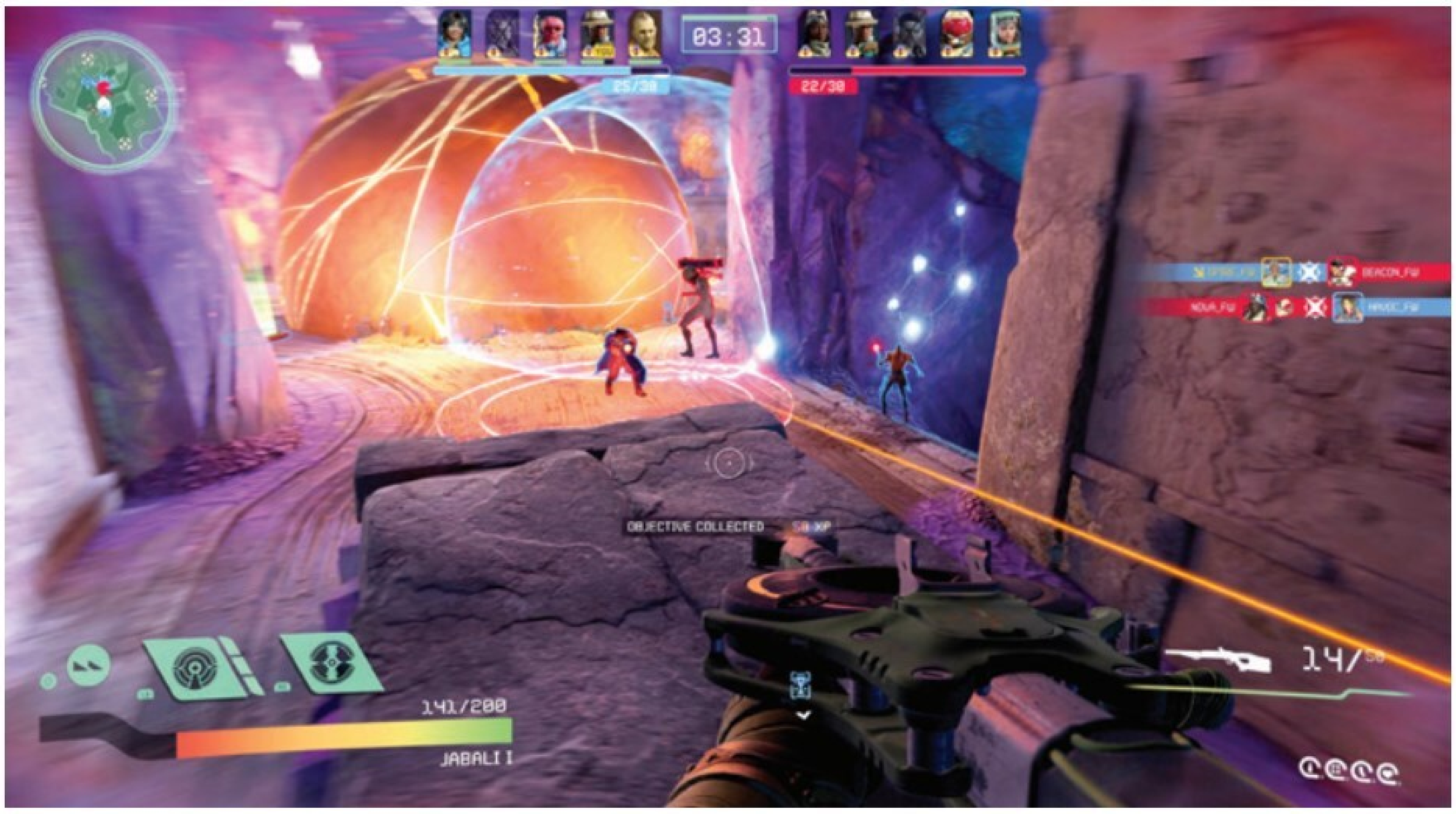
I immediately take a liking to Jabali, a machine gunner who can shoot Life Pulse Orbs at teammates to heal and Hunter Orbs at enemies to deal bursts of damage (you can probably already see the Overwatch comparison). Targeting enemies through Jabali's aim-down-sights is good fun. With a longer TTK than faster first-person shooters like Call of Duty, I have to focus on accuracy (and headshots) to eliminate enemies before they can eliminate me. Because each hero has unique abilities, it's critical I use my orbs in the heat of battle. Without the damage of a Hunter Orb, taking out handgun specialist Lennox (the Star-Lord-esque character from the reveal), whose bullets melt my health bar, would be tough. And even then, I have to watch out for Lennox's exploding knife and self-heal ability.

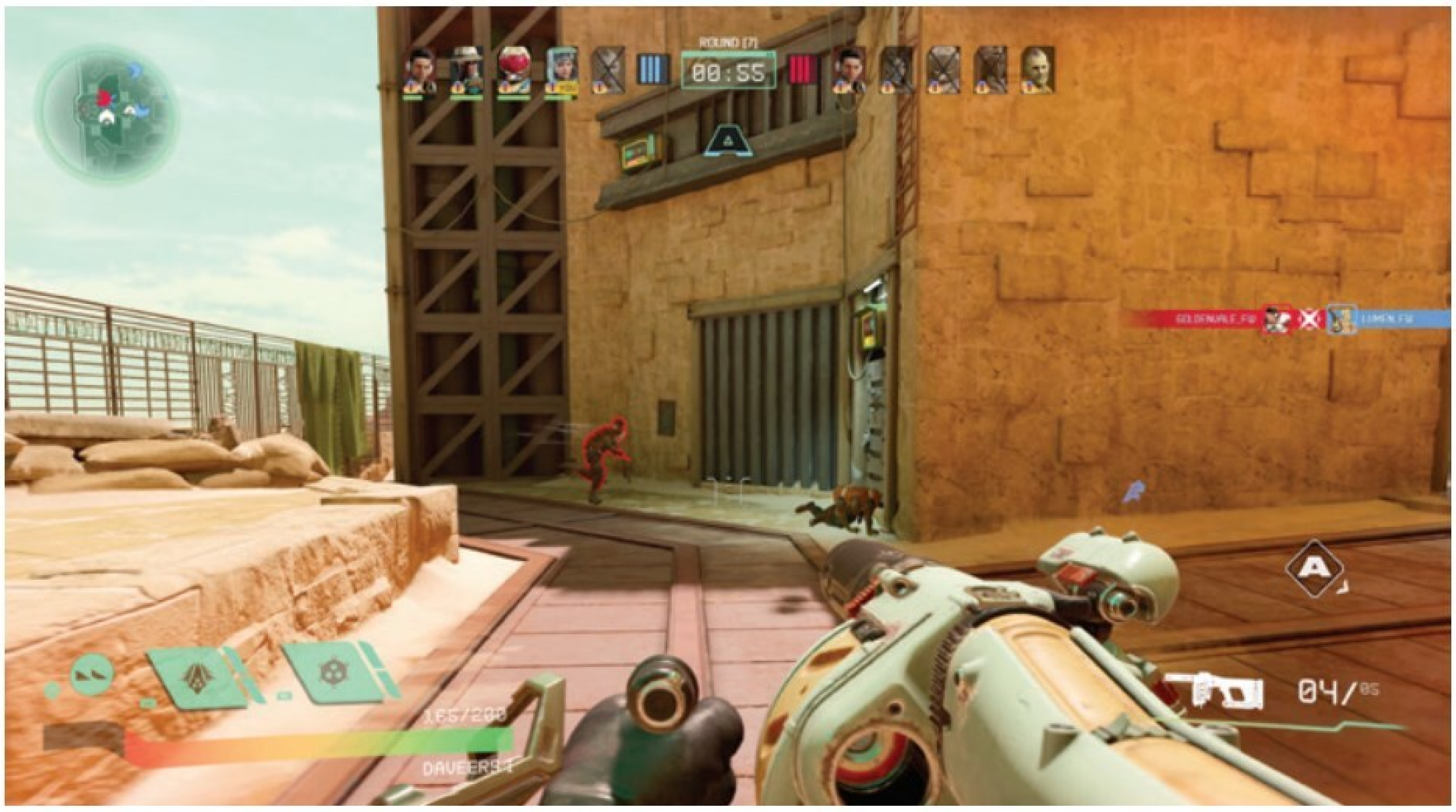
As I play match after match, I enjoy that I have to think about each Freegunner's loadout. Will fire sorceress Haymar float above the field to throw down fire-walls and blinding flash grenades? Is soldier Teo, who plays most like a typical first-person shooter hero, peering through smoke bomb fields he laid down with unaffected eyesight while I struggle to see anything but grey clouds? Does sniper Vale have a trip mine set around the corner, and does former recycling robot 1-Off have an air barrier down to block incoming projectiles like my orbs, both deployables that persist through each round unless destroyed? These are the seconds-long match-ups I consistently have to consider in every engagement. I enjoy this added strategy, and it separates Concord from the typical whoever-shoots-first-wins experience of the FPS genre.

I left this Concord preview significantly more excited for the game's launch on PlayStation 5, which will hopefully bolster its player base with a simultaneous PC launch. Though I have plenty of questions about progression, seasonal content, crossplay checks and balances between those using controller and mouse-and-keyboard players, and whether the emphasis on world-building will pay off, Firewalk has seemingly nailed the most important part: the gameplay. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

Want to see Concord for yourself? Watch New Gameplay Today on our YouTube channel

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1 to 5-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Firewalk Studios
RELEASE August 23





THE PLUCKY SQUIRE

Jumping off the page

While Summer Game Fest is now a distant memory with the speed at which video game news moves, I'm still reminiscing about playing The Plucky Squire, Devolver Digital's upcoming action-adventure game in which a swordsman jumps out of his two-dimensional storybook home to find a vibrant 3D world outside the pages. Developer All Possible Futures co-founders Jonathan Biddle and James Turner combine their past experiences working on The Swords of Ditto and Pokémon, respectively, to sculpt a genre-bending fairytale.

As protagonist Jot, players begin inside the pages of a picture book in a 2D, top-down adventure akin to The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, or more appropriately, Biddle's previous project, The Swords of Ditto. However, The Plucky Squire breaks up these more traditional segments with mini-games like archery, word riddles, and boxing – the latter seemingly pulling inspiration from the Punch-Out!! series. Following early events in the story, Jot can jump out of the book's pages, entering a fully 3D world whenever he does so. Players can use this ability to reach new platforms in the book's otherwise flat pages or explore the contiguous area surrounding the book.

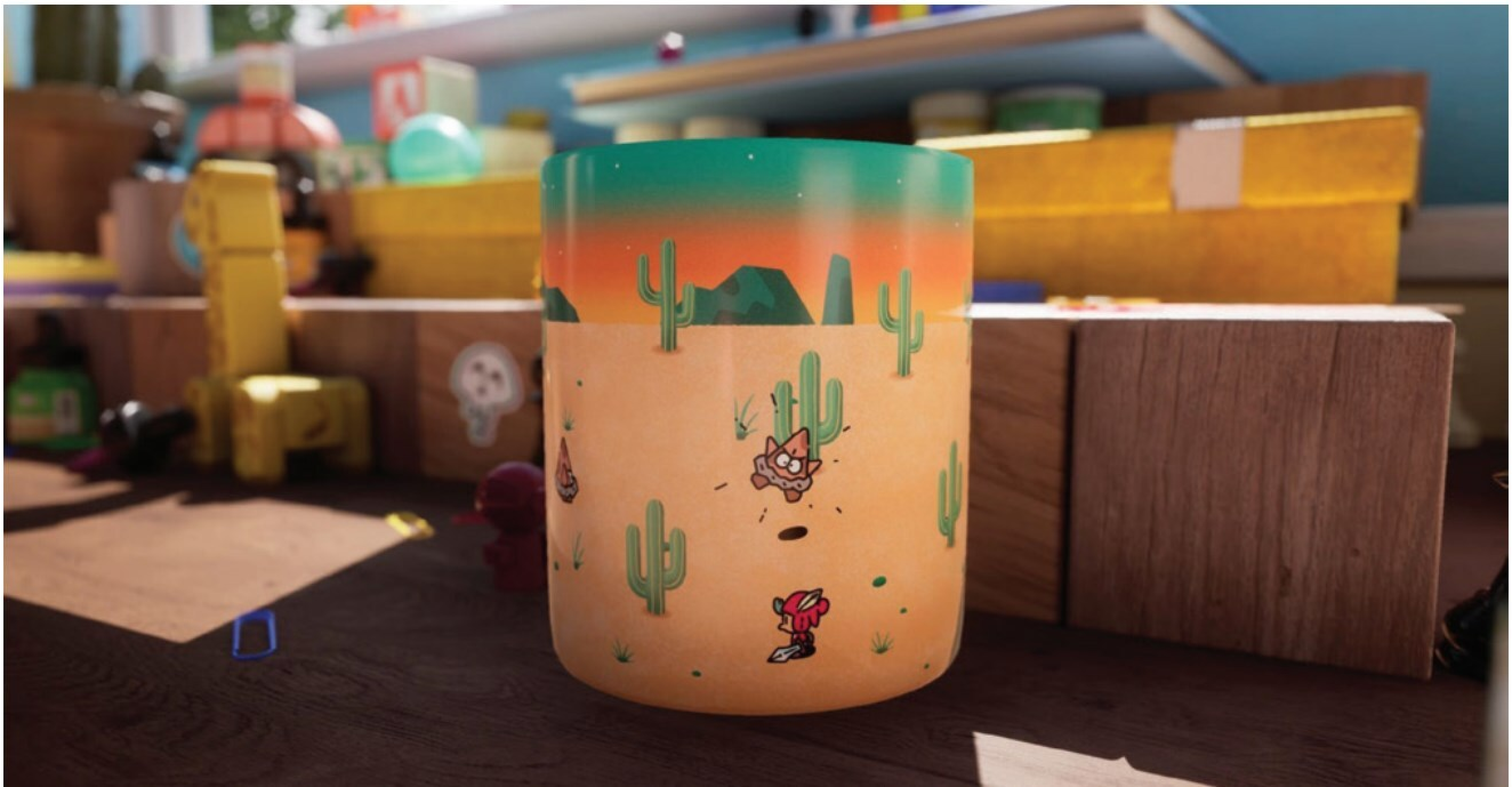
All manner of trinkets populates the explorable 3D environments, creating massive levels and platforming challenges for the tiny protagonist to explore. Early in my demo, I explore a messy desk for the necessary parts to assemble a jetpack, allowing me to briefly fly around with style and speed. Next, I jump into a cardboard wall and pass a brief 2D platforming section before jumping out of the wall and into a previously unreachable place. Eventually, I play a memorable mini-game the development team calls "Resotub," a side-scrolling shoot 'em up – pulling inspiration from 2014's Resogun – which plays out against the plastic surface of a circular tub. According to Turner, who accompanies me during my session, The Plucky Squire is apparently full of "one and done" experiences designed to preserve freshness. He assures me I'll never see "Resotub" in another area of the game.

Turner explains that besides its novel rendering effects, the game engine keeps track of a two-dimensional and three-dimensional version of Jot at any given time, only showing players the appropriate character object. The engine swaps game objects whenever you jump between dimensions, while stylized visual effects and exaggerated animations mask the transitions. While I've yet to see its full scope, The Plucky Squire excels in presentation, enhancing my enjoyment of my hands-on session.

The controls and player feedback feel consistent in The Plucky Squire, allowing me to attribute my successes to technical skill and muscle memory rather than luck. Additionally, the camera system has yet to get in my way, a pitfall I'm glad All Possible Futures seems to avoid.

It's funny: despite my fellow editors' enthusiasm, The Plucky Squire wasn't high on my priority list going into the summer, but after playing it for myself, the game now stands as one of my most anticipated releases. In a particularly bleak year for the video game industry, which has faced thousands of layoffs and numerous studio closures, developer All Possible Futures reminds us that small, independent developers are carrying the torch of further pushing the boundaries of play. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** All Possible Futures **RELEASE** 2024



INFINITY NIKKI

A promising dress rehearsal

Infinity Nikki's big PlayStation State of Play spotlight in May garnered an array of reactions. Fans of the popular Nikki series of mobile fashion games were excited to see the pink-haired fashionista make her triple-A debut. Unfamiliar viewers either dismissed it as an overly cute dress-up game or found themselves unexpectedly intrigued by its delightful and unique spin on an open-world experience. I count myself in that third camp. Something about the game's whimsical premise stuck with me, but after playing several hours of a beta version, I've gone from admiring Infinity Nikki conceptually to being genuinely excited to wear the whole experience.

The adventure sees the titular Nikki and her furry best pal, Momo, unwillingly transported to the magical world of Miraland. A god-like entity tasks Nikki with finding and restoring Miracle Outfits to uncover a divine truth.

I begin the game with three Ability Outfits, special outfits bestowing unique powers. One is the blue dress/blonde hair ensemble seen in the May State of Play trailer, allowing me to perform a floating jump. Not only is this good for crossing large gaps, but Nikki can also perform a plummeting slam to defeat enemies or shatter fragile objects. A Purification dress is used for combat, letting Nikki fire orbs of cleansing energy to purify (not kill) corrupted enemies called Esselings and collectibles. One cute dress lets Nikki groom certain animals to collect materials from them.

Based on the beta slice, Miraland is vast and inviting, thanks to colorful and lush flower fields, rolling hills, and the quaint village of Florawish. Infinity Nikki looks as pretty as her wardrobe. There's plenty to do and explore, whether it's completing side quests or the main hook: hunting for Whimstars. These special stars are used to unlock new items and perks from a skill tree and are scattered everywhere. While some can merely be found (with help from Momo's special vision that can highlight and tag distant Whimstars), others have small challenges tied to them. Examples include defeating enemies or conquering platforming challenges. I like gathering Whimstars as it captures the familiar joy of collecting stars in a 3D Mario game.

The crux of the experience is finding new sketches for dresses and growing your wardrobe to gain new abilities and improve your prowess as a Stylist. What's a Stylist? A person who can style and create sketches anytime, and Nikki even joins a Stylist guild in Florawish. Here, she receives a tablet-like device called a Pear-Pal that keeps track of a litany of goals, such as defeating a quota of enemies or taking photos with an in-game camera. Completing goals raises your rank, which rewards money and materials to unlock more outfits.

Outfit sketches include hairstyles, upper and lower body wear, make-up, and accessories. Unlocking an outfit requires collecting crafting materials like various fruits, flowers, threads, furs, and more. You can outfit Nikki however you wish, regardless of any abilities tied to outfit pieces. It's a compelling hook, and players will likely spend a lot of time making Nikki look as girly, regal, or edgy as they see fit.

Infinity Nikki has an unexpected depth of systems and is chock full of charm at every turn. While I enjoyed basking in its saccharine world, its cinematic teases of a grander mystery intrigued me even more. Most of all, having an open-world game that doesn't feature overt violence is refreshing. I've got my outfit picked out, so hopefully, Infinity Nikki's release won't be too much further.

BY MARCUS STEWART

Catch Infinity Nikki in action on our YouTube channel

PLATFORM PS5 • PC • iOS • Android
STYLE 1-Player Adventure (Multiplayer TBA)
PUBLISHER Infold Games
DEVELOPER Infold Games
RELEASE TBA

DIABLO IV: VESSEL OF HATRED

Hands-on with the new Spiritborn class

Vessel of Hatred ushers in a wave of change for Diablo IV. The game's first expansion takes players to the new jungle region of Nahantu and, most importantly, introduces the new Spiritborn class. I went hands-on with the Spiritborn at a recent preview event, which may be my new favorite class in the game.

The Spiritborn is unlike any Diablo class. It's not based on a traditional fantasy archetype like the Rogue or Mage. Instead, it's a martial arts-inspired class hailing from the dense jungle region of Nahantu. Described as the apex predator of this region, a Spiritborn is chosen from childhood following a brutal ritual that challenges them to survive the jungle's dangers to awaken their "sight." This experience allows a Spiritborn to commune with the Spirit Realm to harness the power of four guardian spirit animals: jaguar, eagle, gorilla, and centipede.

Each spirit animal offers a specific playstyle, modeled to complement the Spiritborn's overall focus on marital arts-inspired gameplay. The jaguar emphasizes relentless fire-based offense and ever-increasing attack speed. The eagle provides lightning and maneuverability with abilities that let players quickly move and evade while electrifying targets. The gorilla boasts defense, letting players absorb and reduce punishment while pummeling foes with mighty physical blows. The centipede deals with debilitating poison attacks and debuffs and abilities designed to disrupt enemy mobs.

Additionally, you can further gear your Spritborn towards a chosen animal using the Spirit Hall. This menu tab lets players gain bonuses based on spirit animals equipped in two slots. The first slot grants a themed mechanic based on the chosen animal; for example, the eagle lets players fire Storm Feathers when evading. The second slot bestows a themed bonus, such as the jaguar gaining attack speed when you kill an enemy. Purists can also put the same animal in both slots. A new skill type called Incarnate Skills allows the Spiritborn to equip and gain a passive trait based on one of the four spirit animals.

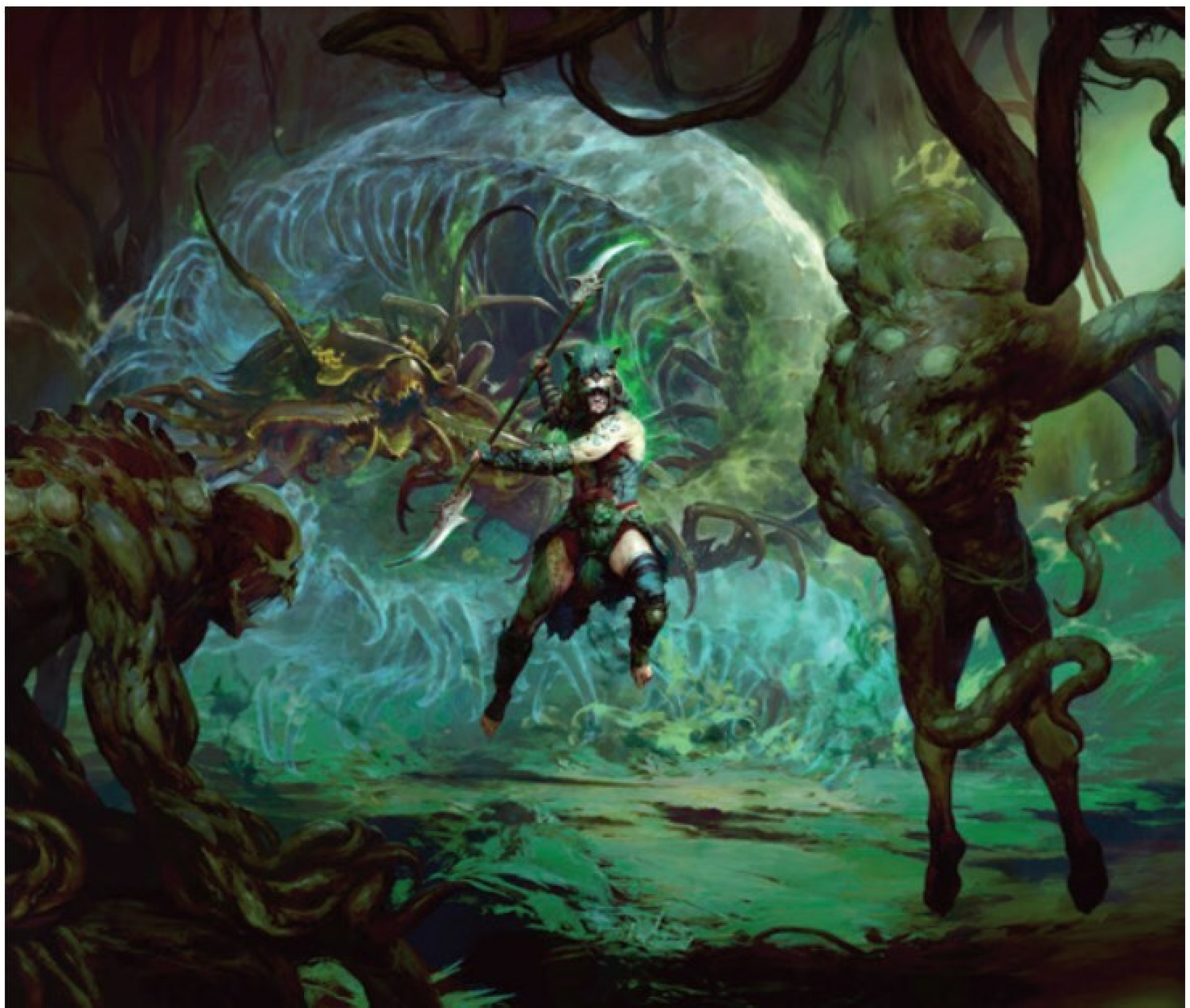
The Spiritborn is a thrill to play; having four animals to work with feels like having four smaller classes in one. You can either mix and match their abilities to form different hybrid playstyles or create a "pure" build based solely on one animal. I rocked a pure jaguar build and incinerated foes with its litany of fire-based attacks. However, I also like combining the gorilla and centipede skills which turned me into a self-healing tank that poisoned everything in sight. The flashy abilities complement the Spritborn's base offensive prowess, which blends myriad disciplines from muay tai to taekwondo. This creates a class that emphasizes fast-paced, hand-to-hand butt-kicking. Combining that with the ability to unleash cool abilities such as summoning giant ethereal beasts to eradicate adversaries and watching the Spirtborn in action is almost as fun as playing it. Almost.

Blizzard has designed weapons and armor to accommodate either approach, with the latter coming in the form of themed armor sets. The class favors polearms, glaives, and quarterstaffs to work with its acrobatic playstyle. Blizzard is also cooking up new Legendaries and Uniques for the class.

The Spiritborn is a blast, and, best of all, newcomers won't have to wait to start the expansion story to play it. Owners of Vessel of Hatred can choose the Spiritborn at the start of the base campaign, so you can battle Lilith as this ferocious new hero. I can't wait to play more when Diablo IV: Vessel of Hatred launches on October 8.

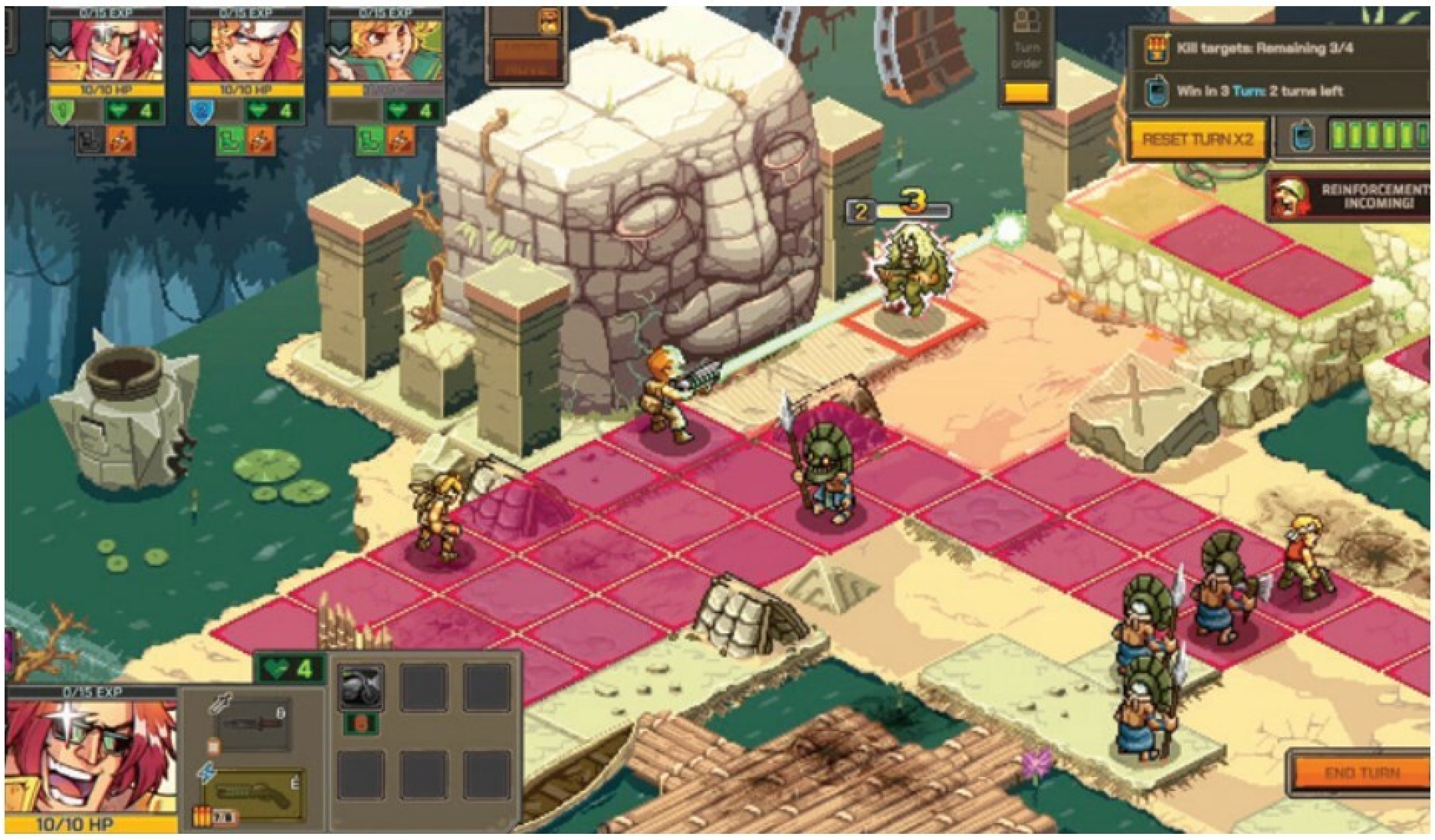
BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) [PS5, Xbox Series X/S], 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) [PC]
PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** October 8



METAL SLUG TACTICS

A promising and challenging boot camp



Metal Slug made its name as a fast-paced, run-and-gun explosive arcade shooter, making it all the more surprising how well it seemingly fits into a slower, turn-based strategy format. Since Metal Slug Tactics' reveal at the final E3 in 2021, both series fans and tactics aficionados have been waiting with bated breath to get their hands on it. I count myself among them and was anxious to play a preview build to see how well this marriage of genres blends.

The three available characters in my demo, Marco, Eri, and Fio (with a fourth – Tarma – unlockable later), come armed with primary and secondary special weapons and can sport unique passive skills and active abilities called Special Actions. For example, Marco emphasizes relentless offense, and his Salvo special action grants himself or an ally an extra hit for a single attack. Special Actions are activated by spending Adrenaline, the game's term for mana points.

Surprisingly, Metal Slug Tactics is a roguelike. After kitting yourself out with various weapons and perks at an outpost, you begin a campaign run. The demo offers one region, Argun Palm Desert, but I spotted three locked regions for a likely total of four in the game. Regions are presented as a world map with eight missions I can tackle in any order. However, I can only complete four before the boss arrives, indicated by a countdown at the top of the screen. Each mission features a primary objective and a secondary, optional task (such as winning without losing a unit or finishing without taking damage), each granting various rewards like XP and resources. Primary mission objectives include wiping out select targets, escaping to an exit, and destroying a convoy before it leaves the map. Failing a mission means starting the entire campaign anew and losing most upgrades. Missions get remixed with different objectives for each playthrough.

Since you can only tackle a mission connected to an adjacent, completed mission, plotting the ideal route to collect the resources you want/need is important. Primary weapons, such as a handgun or, in Eri's case, a grenade, have unlimited ammo. Conversely, the more powerful special weapons, like machine guns or grenade launchers, have limited ammo. Managing the use of your second weapon is critical, as you're only allotted that ammo throughout your entire campaign, though replenishing ammo is a reward for particular objectives. Character revives are also a limited resource, adding thought to when and where to bring back downed allies.

Metal Slug Tactics features standard grid-based movement, and maps often include numerous destructible cover points. Placing units in these blue-coded protective spots reduces incoming damage, even when hit from the exposed side of the cover. My favorite element of stages is interactable hazards that can help eliminate foes without spending precious movement/attack points. I enjoyed shooting a pot to awaken a sleeping cobra that strikes anyone within its range, maiming multiple foes while forcing them to navigate around it until it falls asleep again.

The basic flow of positioning units in line with enemies to riddle them with bullets gets more interesting by lining up sync attacks. By targeting a foe within the same firing range as an ally, that character will automatically attack the target with their primary weapon right after you do. This allows you to unleash a tag-team or even triple-team assault if you play your cards right. It's a fun system that has me thoughtfully considering the placement of each character and feels puzzle-like in discovering ways to maximize each attack.

Metal Slug Tactics' presentation looks great, thanks to the series' charming sprites and animations. A catchy soundtrack courtesy of Tee Lopes is the melodic cherry on top. However, between the strict resource management and the fragility of your upgrade-less units, Metal Slug Tactics is very challenging in the early runs. But once I hit a groove, it became an enjoyable and strategically satisfying romp. I'm still worried about its overall balancing, but there's promise for Metal Slug Tactics to be a mission: success.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Dotemu **DEVELOPER** Leikir Studio **RELEASE** Q4 2024

PERSONA 3 RELOAD: EPISODE AIGIS – THE ANSWER

Loading up for more

In the nearly two decades since Persona 3 established the current formula for the franchise, fans clamored for a way to experience the seminal title on modern platforms. While Atlus released Persona 3 Portable – the game's PSP port – on modern consoles in 2023, the definitive way to play the influential third mainline Persona game arrived earlier this year with Persona 3 Reload.

That entry effectively remade Persona 3 with many of the quality-of-life improvements and presentation elements of Persona 5 Royal. However, it still lacked the content additions of the Persona 3 FES and Portable releases. The first two waves of the Persona 3 Reload Expansion Pass added costumes and music from Persona 4 and 5, but the final portion of the post-launch DLC rectifies the missing content from FES, adding the story epilogue Episode Aigis – The Answer.

"For a remake of Persona 3, we believed that The Answer was an important and beloved epilogue to the story, so it was something we wanted to add when we first drafted Persona 3 Reload," general producer Kazuhisa Wada says. "However, over the course of developing this remake, we ran into a plethora of issues that needed to be resolved. Finishing the project for P3R's main story was already a huge endeavor and we were forced to abandon the idea of remaking The Answer for the time being."

Following the reveal of Persona 3 Reload, the team noticed fan requests for The Answer epilogue to receive the remake treatment as well. As a result, the team started development in the summer of 2023, but uncertainty loomed as the development team wasn't sure how much staff Atlus would allocate to the project. Wada tells me he was prepared to do all the work himself if he needed to release it in a timely fashion while player interest was high. Luckily, Atlus assigned Yu Hashizume as DLC director to oversee the efforts.

Following the events of Persona 3 Reload's story, The Answer focuses on the members of SEES stuck in a never-ending March 31. Players take control of Aigis as they uncover the mystery of March 31 that's causing them to relive the same day. Like the main story of Persona 3 Reload, the narrative of The Answer remains largely unchanged from the original release (though it does include additional scenes through Linked Episodes and extra post-game content). However, The Answer benefits from all the quality-of-life improvements, as well as Theurgy skills for both Aigis and the new character Metis. While dungeon crawling, players can also look forward to Monad doors to make the leap to this DLC.

The team behind this story expansion understands one of the big complaints of the original release: the difficulty. "We are also aware that combat was a point of stress in the original release, so we are looking into fine-tuning the difficulty and balance of the enemy encounters," Wada says. "Furthermore, we are making it possible (except on the highest difficulty) to use the Persona Compendium from Reload's main story after fulfilling specific conditions."

With the impending release of Persona 3 Reload: Episode Aigis – The Answer, the P3R package is quickly approaching its original mission to deliver the definitive experience for all things Persona 3. However, one glaring omission remains: the option to select the female protagonist from Persona 3 Portable. Sadly, Wada tells me that wish will likely remain unfulfilled.

"Back when we were planning The Answer, we had considered the female protagonist, but the more we discussed it, the more unlikely it became," Wada says. "The development time and costs would have not been manageable, and due to the nature of the content, it's difficult to entrust this externally. Even if we were able to move forward, the actual release would end up being far into the future. I apologize to the fans who have supported us for so long, but this follows the same reasoning that allowed us to do Episode Aigis – The Answer: P3R has just released, and there is currently a lot of player interest, so if we are to do an additional release, it has to be now. But since it is not possible for us to release P3R with the female protagonist in this window, we just can't do it. I'm really sorry to all of the fans who were holding out hope, but it is likely never going to happen."

Though not being able to play as the female protagonist – even through future updates – is disappointing, I'm looking forward to reuniting with SEES and returning to Port Island when Episode Aigis – The Answer hits Persona 3 Reload in September. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

Read our review of Persona 3 Reload at GameInformer.com

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Atlus **RELEASE** September 10

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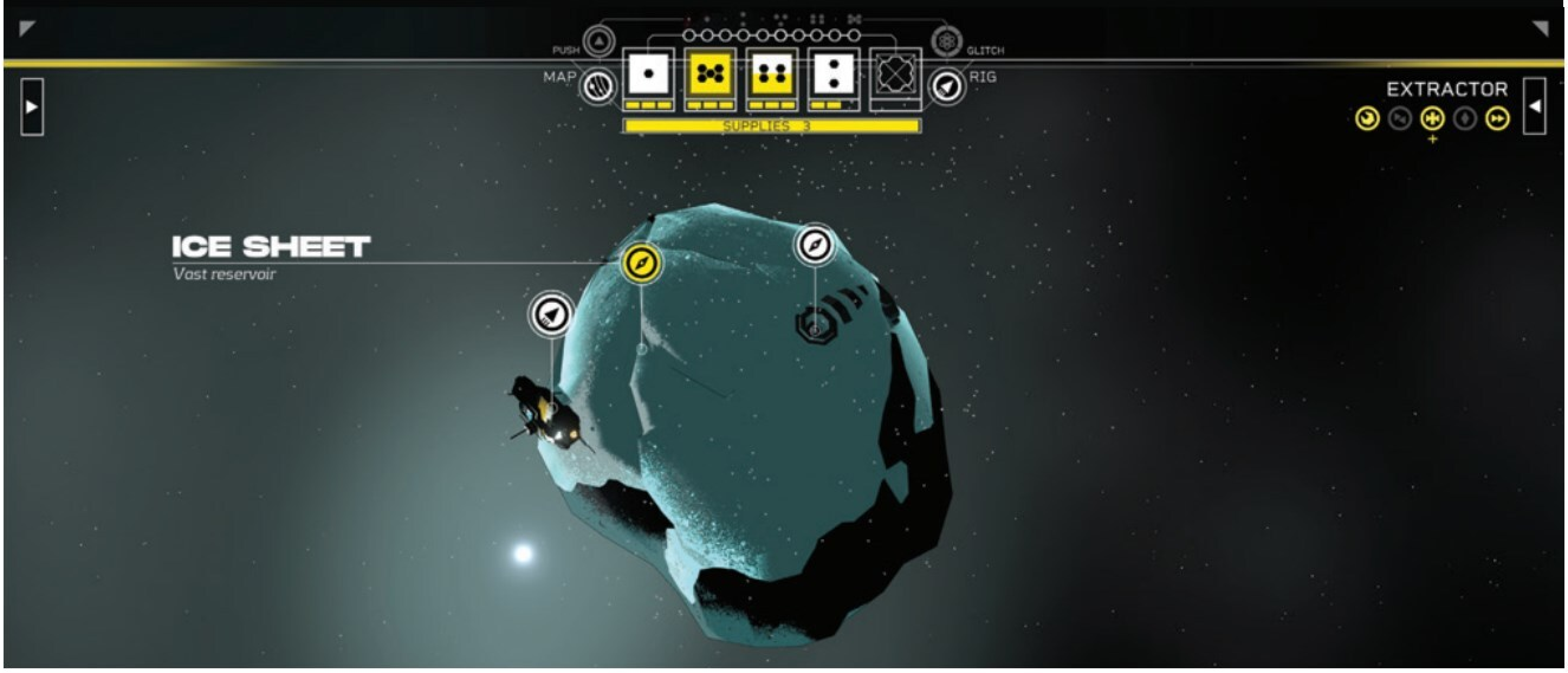


CITIZEN SLEEPER 2: STARWARD VECTOR

On the run, again

Citizen Sleeper took me by surprise in 2022, giving me a rare new video game experience, both mechanically and narratively, and my dice-centric role-playing adventure has stuck with me since. I still think about my Sleeper and what they're up to now. If Elden Ring hadn't been released the same year, it would have been my game of the year with a bullet. Now, a little more than two years later, I've played parts of the opening hour of Citizen Sleeper 2 and find myself desperate to play more. It brings back its incredible sci-fi score, cyberpunk (yet distinct) visual style, and thought-provoking and stress-inducing writing. It infuses everything I love about the first Citizen Sleeper with new mechanics that fuel the game's central decision-making processes.

After selecting my Sleeper, I'm thrown right into the dice action that returns from the first game. Serafin, a friend, needs to check on something, so they task me with going to the Hexport Docks to pick up some small gigs. I put a 5-dice (the higher the number, the more likely the action I assign the dice to results in a positive outcome versus a neutral or costly negative one) on a "Chat to Crews" function here to get some tips on potential crew recruits and contacts. From here, I explore the area and eventually unveil a new location after completing enough actions at a different spot. It's "The Bends," and I can gamble some Cryo (currency) in the Star and Stoker game or buy some fries to restore my energy.

You lose one segment from your energy bar for each cycle or day of action (largely determined by running out of dice). If this bar is empty, you starve and gain one stress bar per cycle, dictating how much damage your dice will take when rolled. Damage a die three times, and it breaks until it's fixed.

Stress joins another new mechanic called Glitch. If you roll your dice while you have some Glitch, which, like Stress, is represented in the U.I., you can roll Glitch dice. These have an 80% chance for a negative outcome but a 20% chance for the best possible outcome, once more playing into the risk-and-reward feel permeating the game. You gain Glitch based on how you repair or heal your body – scrap parts might yield more Glitch, whereas more premium resources yield little to none. Together, these mechanics add an exciting but stressful new layer to each dice-rolled decision.

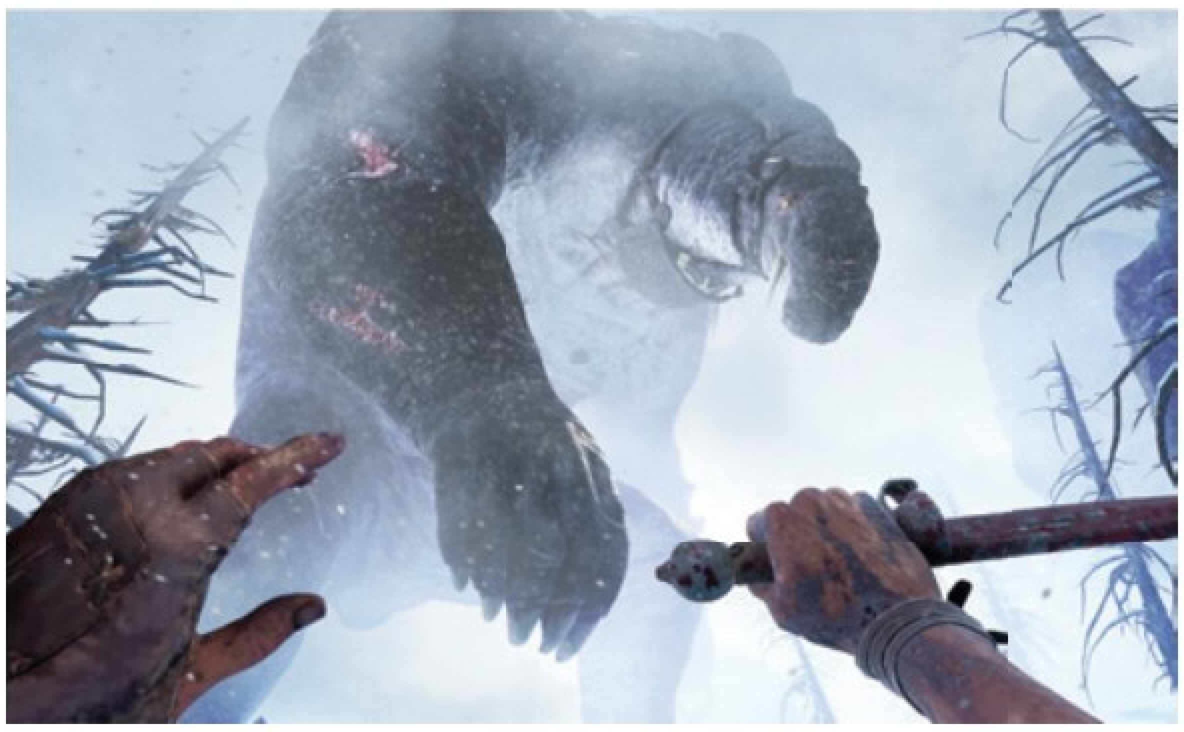
Another new mechanic is Contracts. After picking one up at the Hexport contract board, I learn these high-risk, high-reward jobs greatly expand the scope of Citizen Sleeper 2. Unlike the first game, which primarily takes place on a singular space station called the Eye, Citizen Sleeper 2 gives players access to a large star map with various points of interest.

Before embarking on this contract, the game warns me to ensure I have enough fuel, supplies, and potential freelancers I might need. Your crew plays a significant role both in the main narrative of Citizen Sleeper 2 and these contracts, which developer Gareth Damian Martin describes as vignettes or episodes inspired by, for example, sub-arcs in series like *Firefly*, *Cowboy Bebop*, or other sci-fi greats. Some are high intensity, others are more laid back, Martin says. The one I do in my preview falls into the former.

Citizen Sleeper 2 is, on paper, a classic example of more story, more systems, more to do. But critically, Martin isn't just going bigger, instead carefully curating an experience that strikes sharply at the heart of what made the first game work so well: the oh-so-fine balance between success and failure and the stress that lives between the two. If the heart-pumping I felt during my hour with the game is any indication, Martin has rolled a strong set of dice in this first preview cycle for this sequel. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

Want more Starward Vector details? Read the extended preview at GameInformer.com

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Fellow Traveller **DEVELOPER** Jump Over The Age **RELEASE** 2025



BEHEMOTH

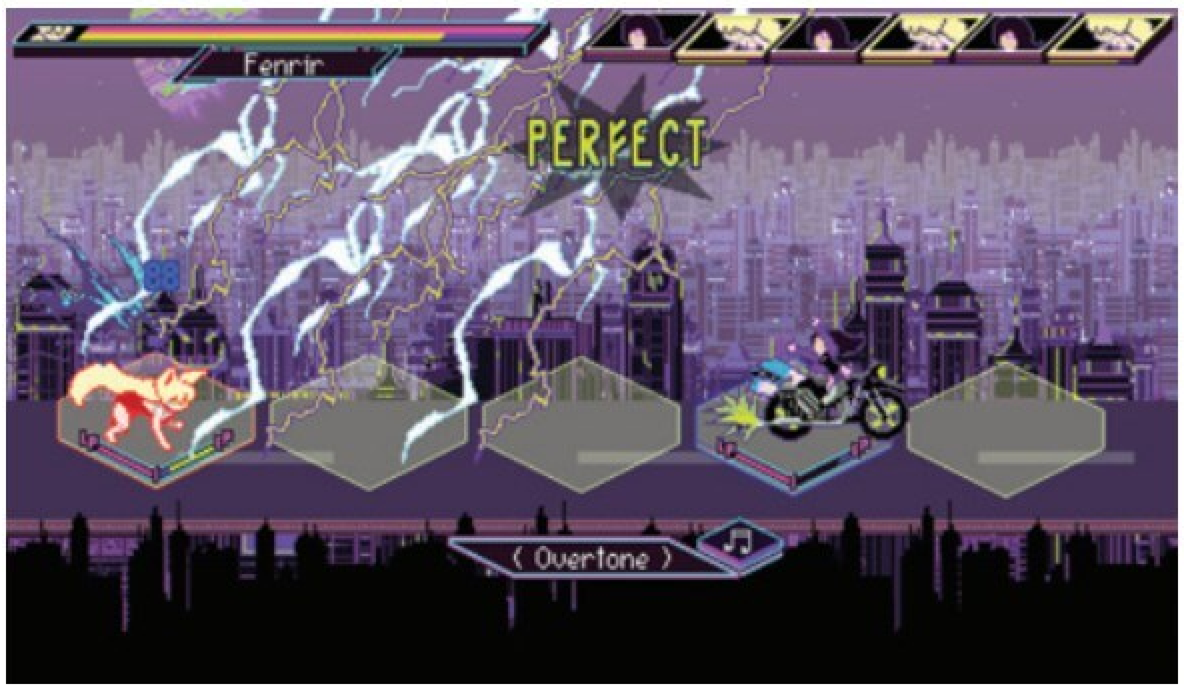
The primary point of inspiration for Behemoth is Shadow of the Colossus, a game about climbing and felling gigantic creatures. It's an excellent fit considering VR is great at delivering a sense of scale. The game comes from the creators of The Walking Dead: Saints & Sinners, and while you will spend time exploring and fighting enemies your size, the highlights are the set-piece encounters where you take down the titular creatures. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PSVR 2 • Meta Quest 3 • Meta Quest 2 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Skydance Games **DEVELOPER** Skydance Games **RELEASE** Fall 2024

KEYLOCKER

Inspired by Chrono Trigger and Nintendo's Mario & Luigi series, Keylocker is a rhythm-based, turn-based RPG set on a cyberpunk planet. Players control singer-songwriter Bobo as they attempt to sic a rebellion against authority and bring music back to a silent world. Hack into networks, perform at concerts with your band, and power your moves with music in Keylocker sometime this summer. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

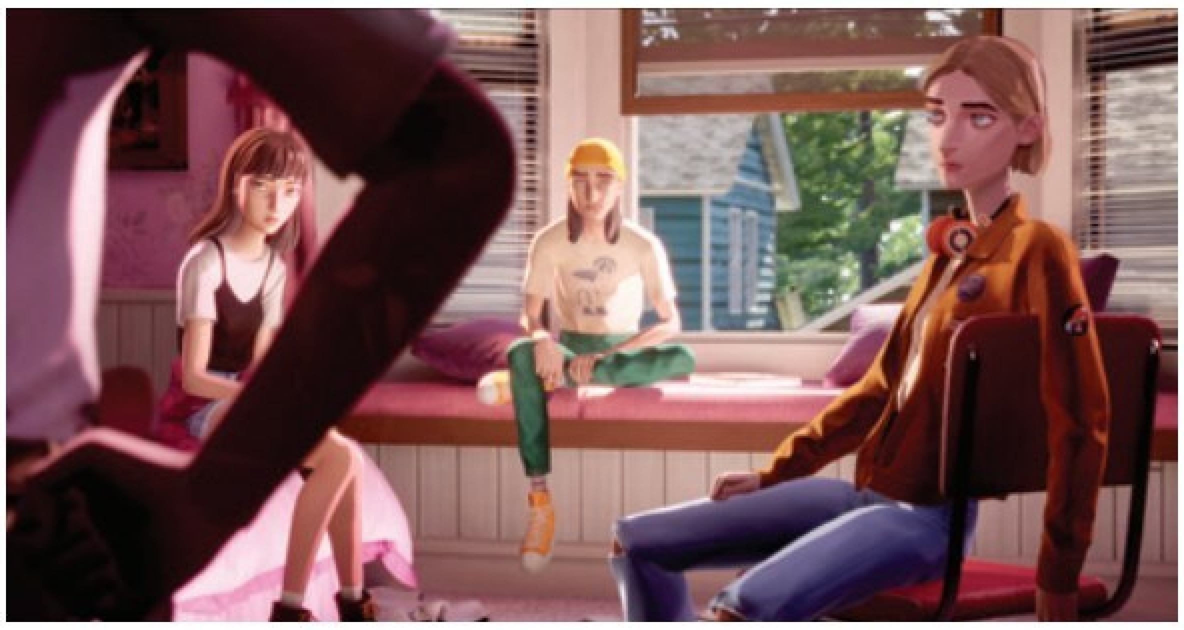
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Serenity Forge
DEVELOPER Moonana **RELEASE** 2024



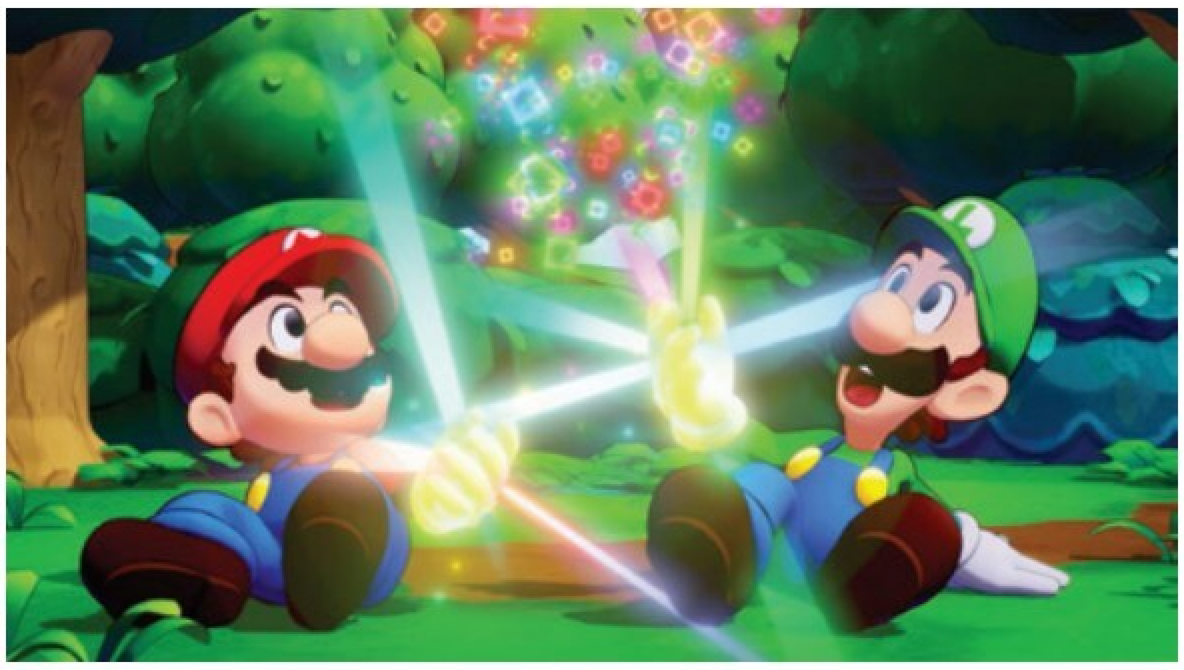
MIXTAPE

The creators of the psychedelic The Artful Escape are back with a new game that, similarly, focuses on music and figuring out who you are. The game features impressive art direction and an animation style that drops frames to great effect. The soundtrack features DEVO, Roxy Music, Lush, The Smashing Pumpkins, Iggy Pop, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Joy Division, and more as you follow a group of teens on an abstract journey of self-discovery and troublemaking. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Beethoven & Dinosaur **RELEASE** 2025



MARIO & LUIGI: BROTHERSHIP



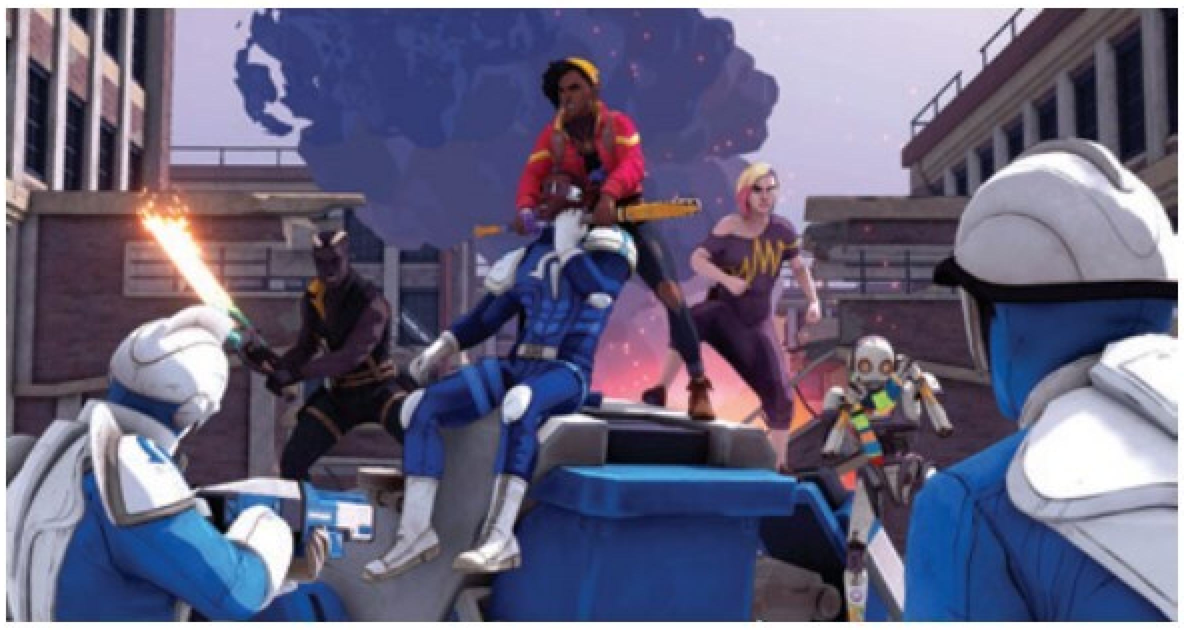
After five original Mario & Luigis and two remakes, series developer and creator AlphaDream announced bankruptcy in 2019. As a result, we assumed the franchise was dead. We still don't know who is developing the new Mario & Luigi, but we're excited it exists. This entry will follow the brothers as they travel to Shipshape Island in the land of Concordia. Even though we just revisited Mario RPG and Paper Mario, we're still eager for another turn-based Nintendo adventure. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** TBA **RELEASE** November 7

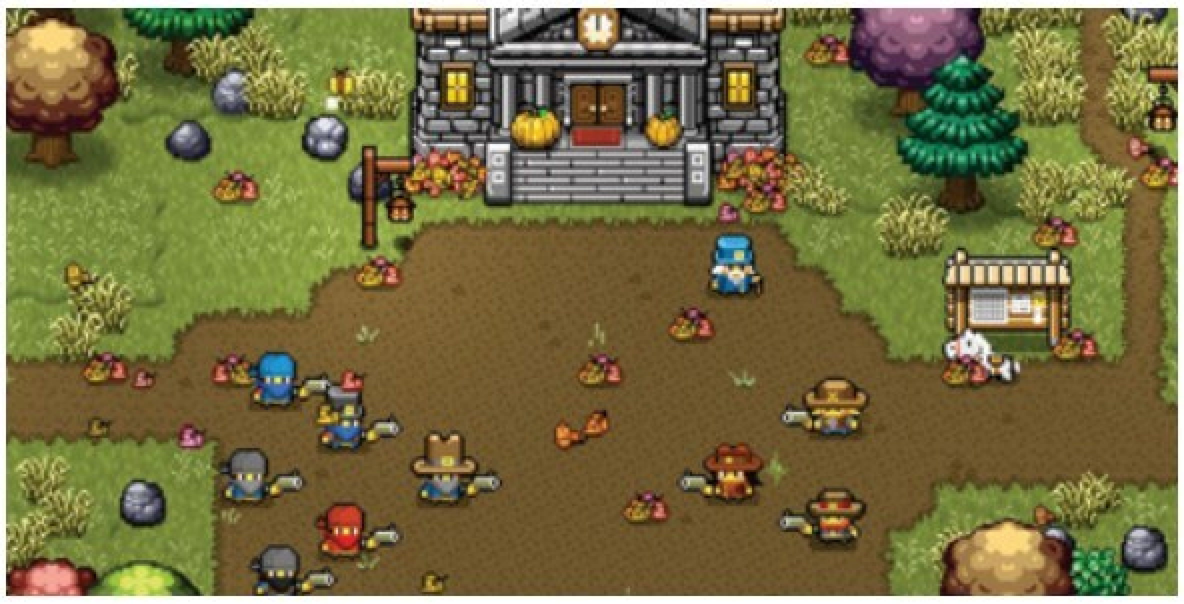
DUSTBORN

Dustborn's zany premise and sharp comic book-inspired art direction is sure to turn heads. Set in a post-apocalyptic U.S., you control Pax, a con artist tasked with delivering a mysterious package cross-country with her friends under the guise of a traveling punk band. Each party member also has a superpower, with Pax weaponizing literal words like Shouts in Skyrim. Tack on reactive, choice-driven dialogue and wacky melee action, and Dustborn is an intriguing mix of promising ideas. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Spotlight by Quantic Dream
DEVELOPER Red Thread Games **RELEASE** August 20



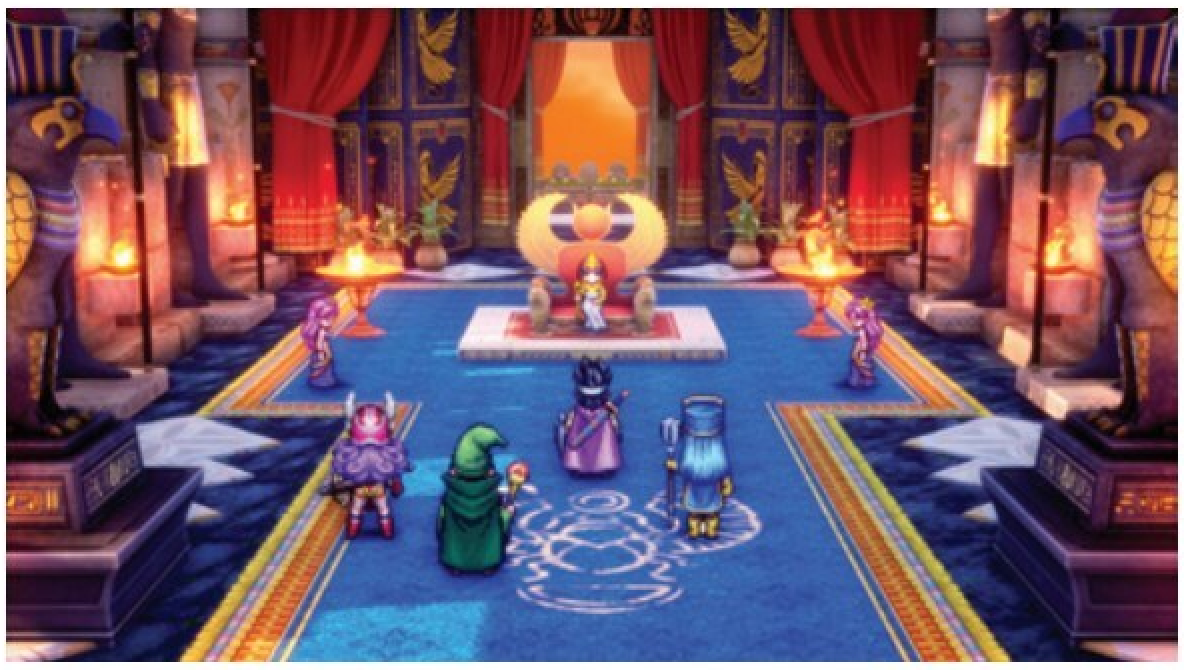
CATTLE COUNTRY



The success of Stardew Valley (itself influenced by Harvest Moon) has inspired dozens of imitators to varying levels of success, but it's the kind of genre proliferation we don't mind. Cattle Country is, potentially, another imitator, but its hook is a good one. Rather than inheriting a family farm from an unknown relative, you are trying to build a better life in the old West. Roger Clark (Arthur Morgan in Red Dead Redemption 2) narrates the trailer, which inspires confidence, even though it is unlikely he will appear in the final game. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Playtonic Friends
DEVELOPER Castle Pixel, LLC **RELEASE** TBA

DRAGON QUEST III HD-2D REMAKE

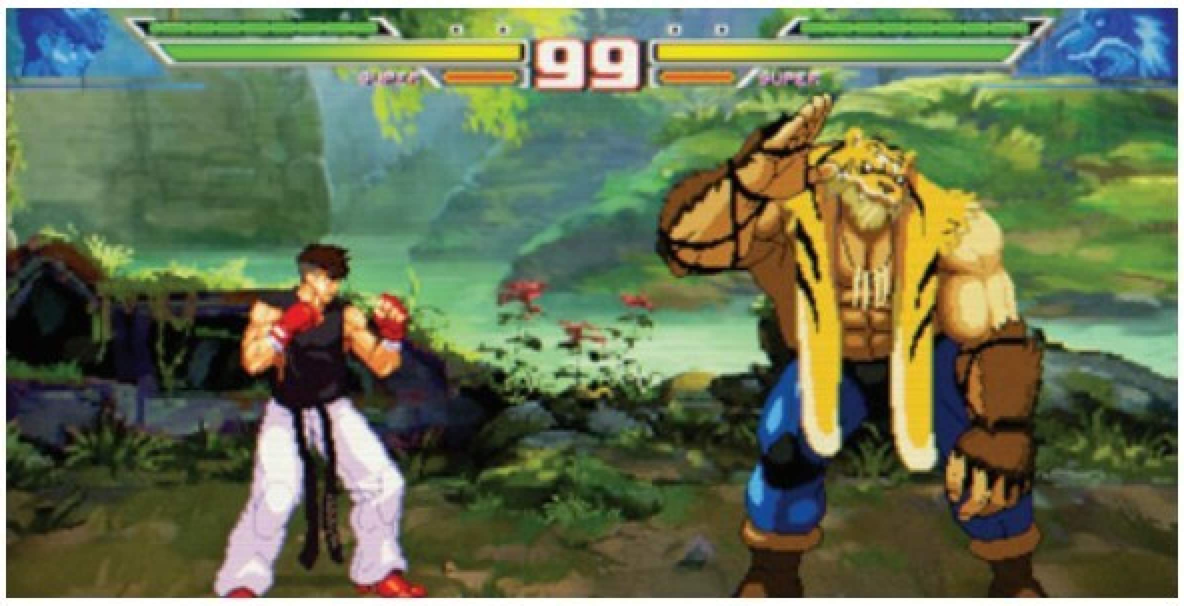


Square Enix finally showed off its long-awaited HD-2D remake of Dragon Quest III, complete with gorgeous visuals, various quality-of-life improvements (including the option to speed up battles), and expanded story elements. I enjoyed my 45-minute session playing the upcoming remake, but the bones of a game that originally launched more than 35 years ago are evident. Still, we're looking forward to experiencing the classic entry in the beloved series when it arrives this November. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Team Asano, Artdink **RELEASE** November 14

BLAZING STRIKE

Inspired by the 2D pixelated fighting greats like Street Fighter, King of Fighters, and many more, Blazing Strike is a throwback versus game that loudly proclaims its arcade roots every time you hit start. We had a chance to play a few matches and enjoyed the impressive animation, nostalgic soundtrack, and retro announcer. We've appreciated the renaissance of 2D fighters ushered in by Street Fighter IV, but it will be nice to play a completely original fighter that feels like it's from a different era later this year. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■



PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting
PUBLISHER Aksys Games **DEVELOPER** Rarebreed **RELEASE** October 17

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For more information on our scoring system, visit GameInformer.com/Scoring
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews

GI MUST PLAY

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

An emphatic exclamation point

Following up Elden Ring is a gargantuan task. It's one of my favorite games, and the base adventure isn't lacking for content, intrigue, or surprises. Shadow of the Erdtree doesn't outclass the primary campaign but expands it, adding a fun and fascinating new zone in the Realm of Shadow. With entertaining new dungeons, a challenging fresh slate of bosses, and a smart new form of progression, Shadow of the Erdtree gives Elden Ring fans more of everything that worked in the main game and is a fantastic excuse to endure its many dangers once more.

From Software expansions are notorious for being more difficult than the base game. Shadow of the Erdtree is harder overall, but the degree of which will, of course, vary based on the character you bring into it. Since defeating Radahn and Mohg is the only prerequisite for beginning the expansion, and Shadow of the Erdtree requires owning the base game, players will likely use late-game or New Game Plus characters.

Because of these circumstances, your character probably requires an exorbitant amount of runes to level up. From Software clearly considered this and introduced smart new progression items called Scadutree Fragments and Revered Ash Fragments. Scattered all over the map, spending these items at checkpoints improves overall damage output and resistance: Scadutree for yourself and Revered Ash for your Spirit Ashes (though the effects only apply in the expansion). This is a great, streamlined method of strengthening your character, and I love not relying solely on grinding to gather tens of thousands of runes to level up once. These fragments won't suddenly turn your Tarnished into an unstoppable juggernaut, but it is a noticeable, if slight, difference that doesn't throw off the game's balancing.

Shadow of the Erdtree also goes out of its way to provide a surplus of smithing stones to upgrade the expansion's plethora of new weapons (which you can use in the base game). This offers a strong argument to retire old favorites in favor of using something new. During the early hours, I stubbornly clung to my endgame loadout. Eventually, I discovered numerous cool and powerful weapons, armor sets, spells, enchantments, and charms that compelled me to finally create new, potent arsenals. Shadow of the Erdtree encourages experimentation as much as the main game, if not more so, thanks to its roster of intimidating, grotesque, and, in some cases, outright bizarre new enemies.

Needless to say, Shadow of the Erdtree isn't a walk in the park. An imposing new class of armored adversaries that would probably be considered mini-bosses in the base game now roam the map as standard enemy types. Basket-like fire giants stomping around the area may as well be wearing signs saying "Mess around and find out" due to how obscenely powerful and sturdy they are. Creative new boss encounters offer fresh – and infuriating – trials that had me yelling in agony at defeat and jumping for joy upon victory. Terrifyingly, a couple of foes may rival Malenia in difficulty. They're all fun to topple, and, like the main game, the sting of defeat can often be remedied by simply moving on to someplace else.

The Realm of Shadow is smaller overall, but it's still huge and sports several postcard-worthy locales, many of which are tricky even to reach. Don't be surprised to go dozens of hours before unfogging the map due to how well From Software uses the Realm's verticality to hide layers of crucial routes and openings. I appreciate how this layered-cake approach to world design makes exploring the Realm of Shadow feel different from roaming The Lands Between. Trekking up or down solves most navigational conundrums, often offering gorgeous landscape views or taking players through underground pathways revealing hidden ruins, villages, and more. Despite the increased challenge of finding where to go next, the thrill of discovery remains a powerful motivator after 40-plus hours of play.

The new dungeons, including repeatable ones like smelting forges and underground gaols, beg to be thoroughly explored thanks to some clever and devious secrets, presenting more great examples of From's exceptional level design. While it's tough to beat mind-boggling discoveries like the underground cities in the main game, a few points of interest gave me pause to admire them and have unique visual identities. Meeting the strange and questionably trustworthy faces occupying these zones is its own treat. Even if you don't totally understand (or care) what's going on with Miquella and his followers, characters like a shady sorcerer soliciting favors or weirdly charitable bug warriors contribute to the expansion's head-tilting but alluring charm.

The boring but ultimately correct shorthand to summarize Shadow of the Erdtree is that it's more Elden Ring. The incredible sense of discovery, fantastic dungeon design, deep combat, and intriguing lore and characters that defined From Software's 2022 masterpiece all apply to this expansion. From Software didn't drop the ball and make Elden Ring worse, nor do I believe it wholly topped what it had achieved before. Shadow of the Erdtree maintains a sky-high status quo, even if it loses a little magic from being a known quantity this time instead of a complete surprise. Still, Shadow of the Erdtree is one hell of a mic drop that further cements this adventure as one of the finest ever crafted. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (3 Players Online) **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER From Software **RELEASE** June 21 **RATING** M

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL

Shonen summer sojourn

In its fifth major expansion, Dawntrail, Final Fantasy XIV is facing its biggest existential crisis yet: where does your story go now that its 10-year main plot is over? Dawntrail forges ahead with an enjoyable summer adventure to the land of Tural, doubling as a trojan horse for what lies in store for the future of the long-running MMO's story. Dawntrail doesn't match the narrative highs of the previous pair of expansions and is flawed in several ways, but its themes of legacy, the importance of culture, and responsible use of technology ring throughout.

Feeling more like a Shonen anime than a fantasy epic of past expansions, Dawntrail has an entirely different feel from the hundreds of hours I've poured into FFXIV thus far. It starts with a tournament of sorts, where four claimants are vying for the title of Dawnservant, replacing the retiring beloved ruler of the new continent of Tural. Instead of being the center of attention, I'm assisting this expansion's main character, the energetic and passionate Wuk Lamat, in her bid to ascend to the ruler of her people. Doing so means competing in a rite of succession by completing trials.

Rather than being driven by conflict, these refreshing trials are leadership lessons, proving whether each competitor is worthy of the Dawnservant's throne. I wish the act of completing these quests were more than menial tasks, but Dawntrail's masterful worldbuilding greatly outweighs my boredom from the lack of action in the early hours. At the core of each trial are fascinating lessons about the diverse cultures and regions of Tural based on Latin American countries. I'm in awe of how much I connected with the mercantile trade-centric Pelupelu and found joy in reconnecting the colorful bird folk called Hanuhanu with the importance and magic of their harvest rituals. Making me care about the people of Tural goes a long way toward bolstering my desire to make things right for them when things inevitably go south later in the expansion.

Despite its simple premise, Dawntrail tackles some heavy subjects within the rite of succession and beyond. Wuk Lamat aims to take the throne to retain the current peace her father has built for Tural over many decades. However, she isn't alone in vying for the title of Dawnservant. Her brother Koana favors bettering society with foreign science. Another brother wants to seize peace by conquering everything, while the powerful and ruthless Bakool Ja Ja envisions returning to the old ways where the strongest rule and the weak serve beneath them. Through each of their actions, Dawntrail explores how we deal with grief, the legacy we leave when our time on this mortal coil ends, and the perversion of the natural order by utilizing advanced technology. The deeper Dawntrail goes down the philosophical rabbit hole, the more invested I became and more forgiving of some of its hard tonal shifts and occasional character inconsistencies.

While I love her anime main character energy, it's sometimes hard to have the back of Wuk Lamat as an ideal ruler of her nation. Her passion is infectious, and her curiosity and willingness to listen and learn are admirable, but her actions often conflict with her devout beliefs. While striving to be a beacon for justice and peace, Wuk Lamat sometimes sacrifices her convictions and sweeps rather big atrocities under the rug that she would otherwise demand accountability for. It's disappointing that these aren't the moments she learns her biggest lessons from, but rather breaking points, swerving away from intriguing and complicated interactions that should have been explored.

Dawntrail's dungeons and trials are consistently a delight, serving great combat scenarios paired with the best tunes on the expansion's catchy soundtrack. Each boss fight sports unique mechanics that are intuitive to learn and build on one another, forming complex and satisfying combat puzzles to solve if you're paying attention. After playing an MMO for hundreds of hours, it's nice to have challenging content that tests what I've learned and introduces new ways to keep me on my toes.

Dawntrail doesn't reach the peak of earlier Final Fantasy XIV expansions, but its path is different. Its mission is to begin a new grand tale, and it absolutely succeeds in placing the threads for the future while weaving an effective story about legacy and loss. Although I have grievances about the pace of questing and the main character's contradictory actions, I've loved my time exploring Tural and can't wait to see what the next chapter of the story brings. **BY JOHN CARSON**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** MMORPG **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Creative Business Unit III **RELEASE** July 2 **RATING** T

GI MUST PLAY

DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE

For the Guardians

After 10 years of storytelling, the overarching saga that was introduced in the original launch of Destiny has finally concluded. With The Final Shape, Bungie ties a bow on the vast majority of its lingering plotlines and questions and sets the stage for a new direction in subsequent releases. Ahead of that, this concluding chapter is extremely satisfying, offering a rousing, heartfelt, and character-driven wrap-up that does right by what has come before. From narrative to gameplay, this is not the installment that welcomes newcomers. But for every hour (or thousands of hours) a player has invested in this adventure, the ending on offer is that much more potent.

The Final Shape expansion transports Guardians into the mysterious interior of the massive spherical Traveler, a space of liminal and surreal environments halfway between real and imagined. In a decade of strong location design, this new destination is the most unusual and artistically striking, regularly nodding to places we've visited before and combining them with strange organic shapes like giant hands and faces carved in rock.

The campaign is set up as a non-stop journey from point A to B, with waypoints that act as moments of anguish and catharsis for the most important players in the story over the last decade. It's the most human and relatable storytelling the franchise has yet managed.

Thanks to the delightfully dangerous Dread faction of enemies, and a number of raid-like mechanics, the missions feature a satisfying mix of intense action and gunplay while requiring careful observation. The story lands with a satisfying punch of exhilaration and emotion by weaving the raid completion and one final concluding activity together. Grand and epic storytelling demands a clever mix of bombast and poetic sensibility, and this is one of those times when a game has hit the mark.

The new prismatic subclasses – alongside a range of other new abilities – make this expansion the most mechanically complex the franchise has yet dared. Buildcrafting and experimentation are necessities for high-level play. Despite some efforts to simplify, the glut of currencies and interwoven progression systems has grown painfully convoluted even for veteran players. It's hard to even imagine how a newcomer would pierce the veil and get up to speed.

Nonetheless, Bungie deserves props for trying to explain systems in-game and providing guidance on how to improve. Alongside some awesome new exotics and legendary weapons (that almost feel like exotics), players have an enormous array of options to tweak and play how they want. The sandbox is vast, and we have plenty of unique ways to play inside.

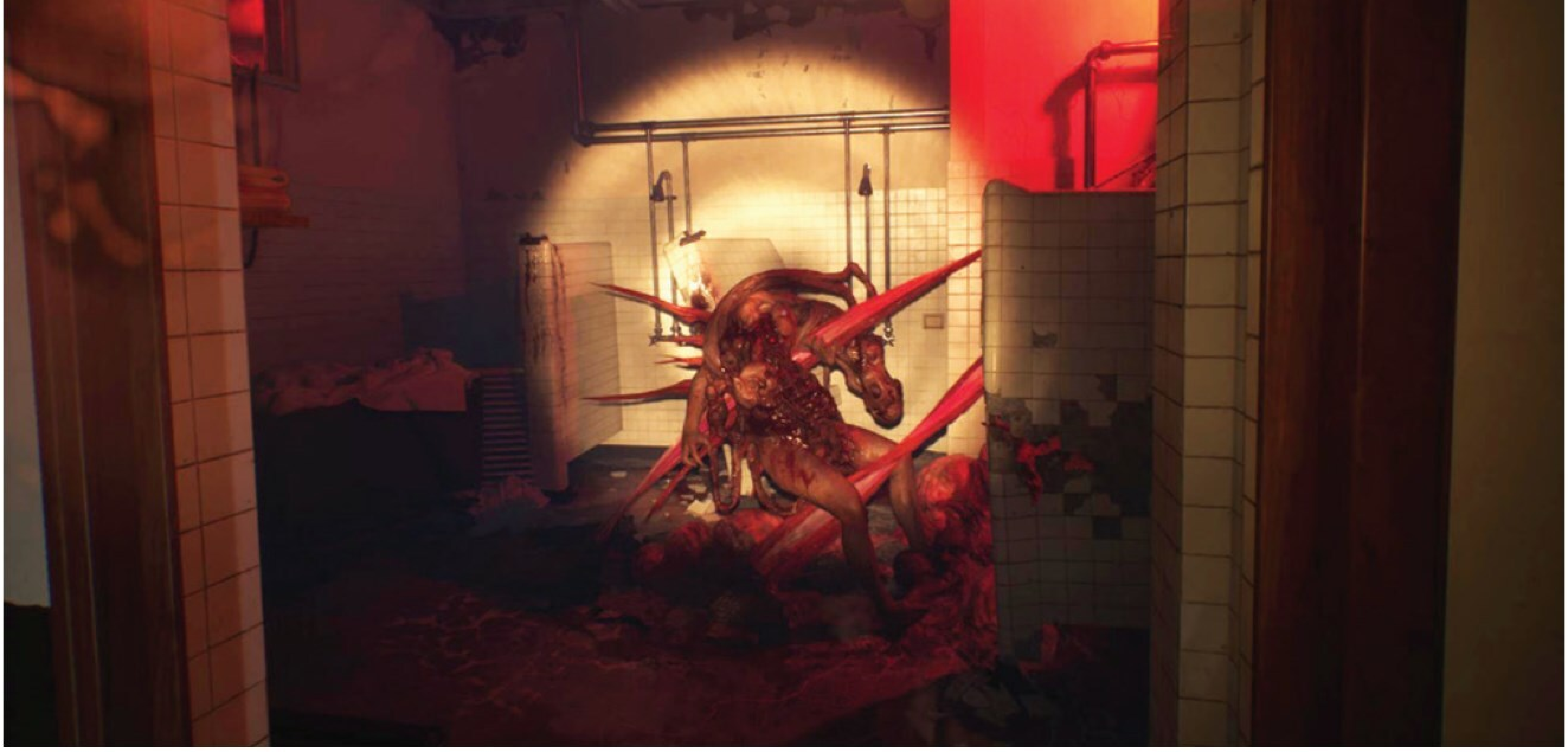
Some new systems, like the new Pathfinder system, are fascinating ideas that remain too prescriptive, often demanding styles of play that some players aren't interested in trying. That said, many of the new public events, matchmade activities, and post-campaign missions are fun and thoughtfully built to allow for extensive and enjoyable replay. Many of the current high-tier activities, including the new raid and certain gear chases, are extremely challenging, and should offer a meaningful mountain to climb for most endgame players for many weeks ahead.

As if to remind players that one story's conclusion is just the start of another, The Final Shape wasted little time in launching its new episodic structure to replace seasons. The full reach and potential of that new rollout approach goes beyond the scope of this review and will stretch into future months. However, it's enough to know that a pleasing follow-through already awaits those who smash through the saga's ending and are ready to keep going, with new activities and rewards, like exotic class items, waiting to be chased.

Over the years, Destiny 2 has ballooned into a massive and unwieldy beast, filled with cooperative and competitive experiences, hundreds of named characters and organizations, and an often-unapproachable vernacular that can take a long time to learn to speak and play. With The Final Shape, Bungie makes no apologies for the complexity but does finally offer purposeful punctuation to mark an endpoint. Largely unencumbered by what has come before, the frontiers ahead are now open to be revealed. **BY MATT MILLER**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** Online Multiplayer Shooter
PUBLISHER Bungie **DEVELOPER** Bungie **RELEASE** June 4 **RATING** T



STILL WAKES THE DEEP

I sea dead people

Still Wakes the Deeps puts you in the shoes of Cameron "Caz" McLeary, an engineer working aboard the Beira D oil rig, which is located somewhere in the North Sea. Things take a turn for the worse when a machinery malfunction leads to something darker and deadlier. What follows is a tightly woven, dread-inducing romp where you're not entirely sure if anyone will survive the night. Think of it as *The Thing* meets Amazon's *The Rig* – just replace the glowing spore pods with actual monsters, and you're on the right track.

Right from the onset, Still Wakes the Deep immerses you in its setting thanks to a talented voice cast composed of Scottish actors, proving the dedication of developer The Chinese Room to offering an authentic experience. Likewise, I found the layout of the oil platform fascinating. A certain creative flair arose when I realized how each area I revisited looked and felt different due to the events that transpired as I progressed. For instance, corridors accessible beforehand might be flooded down the line, and open doors might become barred later.

Moreover, the game has its fair share of context-sensitive interactions, such as using fire extinguishers, unscrewing ventilation shaft covers, and removing latches off contraptions. There are also several platforming sections, where you jump or shimmy across gaps or climb on ladders, with quick-time event button presses to prevent you from falling.

What drew me in within the first few hours of playing Still Wakes the Deep was the sense of foreboding. At first, I could only see a few glimpses of what was in store, like red sinewy branches protruding from the waters. Then, things got progressively darker, with the tense atmosphere building up thanks to spectacular shadow and lighting effects.

Shortly thereafter, I'd hear the pained moans and bloodcurdling screeches of workers. And then I'd see what had happened to them: people who've been smashed into fleshy blobs, faces frozen in a death scream. Their bodies have been turned into misshapen and grotesque forms, with multiple limbs clickety-clacking as they move about. One of them is actually just a big head with little arms who chases Caz all over the facility.

Unfortunately, Still Wakes the Deep botches the "survival" in "survival horror." All these eldritch creatures, no matter how scary they look, are dumber than a bag of rocks. Since there's no combat, I relied on stealth and distractions to navigate areas. If a monster so much as spotted me, all I had to do was hide underneath a desk or walkway, and they'd be none the wiser.

Outside of chase sequences, which were few and far between, there was very little to excite me upon encountering these entities once I realized the AI's limitations. While blurry spots did appear on the edge of my screen when looking at monsters, these were solely for visual flair; it walks up to the line of including debilitating "sanity" mechanics, but since they aren't actually present, it felt more like a tease.

Still Wakes the Deep is a relatively short game (I completed the campaign in under five hours). The story is strictly linear, akin to some of The Chinese Room's other games, with no collectibles or secrets. While it's true that the game builds on the setting, atmosphere, tension, and body horror, it flubs the most crucial aspect: the moments when you actually face the creatures. It's as if The Thing was "from another world," but it's revealed to be E.T. due to how harmless it is. In the end, this romp through an infested oil rig might look slick, but it spills over and slips when it matters most.

BY JASON RODRIGUEZ

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Secret Mode
DEVELOPER The Chinese Room **RELEASE** June 18 **RATING** M

SUPER MONKEY BALL BANANA RUMBLE

A ripe return

Outside of remasters and remakes, the Super Monkey Ball franchise has been dormant for a decade. At a certain point, it began feeling like AiAi and his crew of monkeys were relics of a bygone era and that Super Monkey Ball was little more than a nostalgic series that has no real place in the modern gaming landscape. Super Monkey Ball Banana Rumble disputes that assertion by delivering an experience that's at once delightful, maddening, and rewarding, but above all else, fun.

At its best, Banana Rumble's Adventure Mode delivers some of the top stages in Super Monkey Ball history. Particularly early on, I relished figuring out the optimal strategies to roll through the puzzle-like levels while achieving the three optional missions of collecting a set number of bananas, grabbing the golden banana, and finishing in a set time. Thanks to the new spin-dash move, I loved figuring out ways I could launch my character off ramps and lips to rocket through the goal or grab the golden banana.

The early stages best exemplify the series' easy-to-learn, difficult-to-master hallmark. Blasting through stages in the first few worlds is intuitive and lighthearted thanks to improved physics and a better camera. Those levels are ripe for experimentation into the best ways to get through the level efficiently; on multiple occasions, I wondered if the developers intended for me to complete the stage in that manner or if I discovered some kind of secret. Those stages represent the Super Monkey Ball franchise at its absolute peak.

As you would expect, progression through Adventure Mode's campaign brings increasingly difficult stages. Though I love trying to work my way through a difficult level, the restrictive nature of these more challenging obstacle courses often squashes my favorite aspect of this mode: experimentation. Instead of trying to find optimal paths and ways to sequence-break the levels, later stages in the game just had me fighting for survival as I desperately tried to make it to the goal.

The stages near the end of the 200-level campaign transcend Banana Rumble's cute and colorful aesthetic to deliver pulse-pounding challenges that had me gripping my controller as tightly as I could while my character careened around corners and tempted fate with death-defying jumps. I largely enjoyed these levels, though they sometimes shined a light on the limitations of even the improved physics system, and the busier the stages got, the more noticeable the performance dips became.

If these stages ever feel too difficult, you can turn on Helper Functions, which add a ghost guide, arrows demonstrating the best path, a rewind function, and a mid-stage checkpoint. Though I used them extremely sparingly, if I ever turned them on, they immediately proved invaluable in getting past the roadblock I was stuck on.

Adventure Mode can be played with up to 4 players in co-op, but the real multiplayer experience allows for up to 16 players to compete in various party-style minigames. Players can compete in drawn-out races where rubber-banding comes not through the A.I.'s ability but rather the course being more challenging the further towards the front you are. I loved this twist on the tried-and-true formula, particularly with the various power-ups injecting extra chaos into the mix.

Meanwhile, Ba-Boom provides a fun survival-based tag variation, and Goal Rush challenges your precision and mettle as you roll down a hill, activating gates in a high-risk, high-reward blitz. The other two Battle Modes, Banana Hunt and Robot Smash, have you collecting bananas on an open map and launching into robots to deal as much damage as possible, respectively. Banana Hunt and Robot Smash were my least favorite of the bunch, but they still serve as fun side activities to Adventure Mode's main course.

Super Monkey Ball Banana Rumble aptly demonstrates that the franchise still has something to offer in 2024 beyond nostalgia. With an eclectic mix of platforming levels and party games, Banana Rumble holds little back, offering a robust package that effectively announces the series' true return. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming (16-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **RELEASE** June 25 **RATING** E

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V: VENGEANCE

Misery loves company

GI
MUST PLAY

Despite being a flagship franchise, Atlus has never shied away from taking risks and experimenting with Shin Megami Tensei. Even without taking spinoffs like Persona or Devil Summoner into consideration, the "core" series has taken new forms and reinvented itself over multiple decades and platforms. 2021's Shin Megami Tensei V was a prime example, both respecting its oppressive, hardcore roots while embracing Atlus' evolving audience and conventional shifts in games as a whole. It only makes sense that in revisiting such a recent title, Atlus has done far more than produce a simple port with some bonuses. Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance is aptly titled; it's an act of defiance against convention, criticism, and maybe even its own reputation.

SMT V was a big deal for the series, its HD debut after previously moving from the PlayStation 2 to the 3DS. It was a novel combination of post-apocalyptic doom and gloom with colorful superhero action. As the "Nabohino," a powerful fusion of human and synthetic demon, players traversed the sand dunes of a long-dead Tokyo, fighting for control of the future in the aftermath of a war between Heaven and Hell. While some found the story lonely with a distinct lack of supporting characters, I found SMT's recurring theme of a lone human fighting a hopeless battle in a world already lost more resonant than ever in the middle of a pandemic.

On the surface, SMT V: Vengeance is a home run without any extra effort. The original game being a Switch exclusive meant it arrived with inevitable technical compromises. Vengeance is still on the Switch, but its multiplatform debut means every inch of its world is out in full force. This game is as colorful as it is dour, juxtaposing multicultural religious imagery with post-apocalyptic destruction. Simply being able to dash across the shining dunes of Da'at (formerly Tokyo) without the frame rate sputtering is worth the price of admission.

But there's so much more to Vengeance than a touch-up under the hood. Rather than being a sequel in the style of SMT IV: Apocalypse or a pseudo spinoff like SMT: If, Vengeance offers a totally new campaign scenario. Nearly the entire story is completely retold, using the original premise as a springboard to leap into a scenario with new central characters, antagonists, and entirely different endings. On top of that is a massive amount of retooling, with changes and adjustments that range from quality-of-life tweaks to brand-new features entirely. Vengeance is almost a whole new game that treats the original as a rough draft. "Almost" is a keyword here, because the original scenario is also selectable at the beginning, so you can still experience the original story while enjoying the new features and adjustments.

In many ways, the new scenario feels like a direct response to problems players had with SMT V the first time around. As a returning player and a longtime fan of the series in general, it's a bizarre setup with an impressive level of self-awareness. Moments occur when the story appears to change from the original in a direct and crowd-pleasing way, only for it to yank the rug out from you violently, twisting the twist to make it even more unpleasant than before. While I didn't agree with the criticisms that led to this new campaign in the first place, having a whole new story to dig into that toyed with my previous knowledge was a lot of fun.

The new character was intriguing and added a lot to the scenario, and getting more of the returning cast admittedly fleshed out the plot more. I did find having them playable to be kind of silly, as using a team full of my own demons was always more productive anyway.

This remixed approach could be confusing to a newcomer. Luckily, Vengeance accounts for that too, and the choice of which version to pursue is presented in-game in a way that's practically seamless. It simply feels like yet another option in a game and series full of choices that impact where the narrative goes. There isn't special attention drawn to it, nor does it feel like an awkward attempt to replace or undermine the original. It's just more SMT V to dive into, which for an already jam-packed RPG full of narrative agency and monster-collecting action, is more food on the table for the feast. And it was a hell of a feast to begin with. **BY LUCAS WHITE**

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Atlus **RELEASE** June 13 **RATING** M

HAUNTII

Though Hauntii offers simplistic shooter pleasure, my favorite moments didn't involve blowing targets to smithereens. The beautiful ending sequence stands out as a highlight of the year. Hauntii transforms the understandable anxiety and fear surrounding death into an alluring and comforting reflection of the joy of life. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Firestoke **DEVELOPER** Moonloop Games
RELEASE May 23 **RATING** E

VOTE
CRIME
COP
MUST PLAY

ANGER FOOT

Thwarting foes milliseconds before they pull the trigger, either by brute force or cleverly utilizing my surroundings, never ceased to feel cool. You should definitely walk a mile in these shoes. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Free Lives **RELEASE** July 11 **RATING** NR

LUIGI'S MANSION 2 HD

This HD version is not a radical reinvention of the handheld game, but it's a well-executed port of an experience that always deserved a little more. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

7.75

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Next Level Games **RELEASE** June 27 **RATING** E

NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS: NES EDITION

I have my frustrations with the game's coin system to unlock additional content, and unfortunately, most, if not all, of the games in the collection do not stand up to the test of time. But as a means to highlight Nintendo's history, participate in some nostalgia with local friends, and play classic games for exactly as long as they're fun, Nintendo World Championships: NES Edition succeeds in its intention. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

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PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 8-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Indieszero **RELEASE** July 18 **RATING** E

RETROSPECTIVE

INDIE GAME CHANGERS

As Devolver Digital turns 15 years old, its founders and the developers it has worked with reflect on how it became one of the premier names in indie publishing

BY BRIAN SHEA

Game publishers serve many purposes. For some, they're the money people who inject a developer with enough capital to get the game across the finish line in the originally envisioned state. For others, they're development partners, providing feedback and suggestions where they see fit. And for others still, publishers are marketers and businesspeople, getting the game in front of media and influencers, and even helping to place games on a wide range of storefronts in different regions of the world.

Renowned indie publishing label Devolver Digital has proven to be all of those things, giving smaller development teams the support they need to deliver their visions to the masses. However, one role Devolver never wants to fill is that of the overbearing publisher. That was the core idea behind the creation of Devolver Digital and likely one of the biggest reasons why the personality-filled games it has published over its 15 years of existence continue to find audiences across the globe.

A NEW WAY

Devolver was founded in Austin, Texas, in 2009 by Harry Miller, Rick Stults, and Mike Wilson, who had previously co-founded the publishers Gathering of Developers, aka GodGames and Gamecock Media Group. Joining them were founding partners Nigel Lowrie, whom they met through Gamecock, and Graeme Struthers, who had also worked with the trio through other ventures. Devolver wanted to establish a new model for independent publishers focused squarely on digital distribution, with a core philosophy based around handling the logistical tasks so developers can focus on the most important part of game development: creating the game.

In looking at how to approach creating a company this way, the founding team looked at the past successes with Gathering of Developers and Gamecock, which were founded on the notion of power staying with the developer and approaching the various challenges of the industry differently. Gathering of Developers was acquired by Take-Two Interactive in 2000 before being closed in 2004, while Gamecock was acquired by SouthPeak Games in 2008, then shuttered during that year's financial crisis.

Rather than allowing the economic conditions to dictate their careers, several of those displaced by the closure of Gamecock strategized what would come next. "We were sitting around, and we said, 'Well, we still want to do video games,' and us five started Devolver," Lowrie says. "Croteam was like, 'Hey, we have Serious Sam 3 we're working on. [...] You're the only people we've ever trusted in publishing; I heard you're starting a publisher again. Would you like to work on this?'"

The rapport was established thanks to Gathering of Developers publishing Serious Sam: The First Encounter and The Second Encounter in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Because of this existing relationship with Miller, Stults, and Wilson, Croteam wanted to continue publishing games with the group. For the first couple of years, several founding members worked at Devolver on the side of their full-time jobs and didn't take a salary until the company could get off the ground.

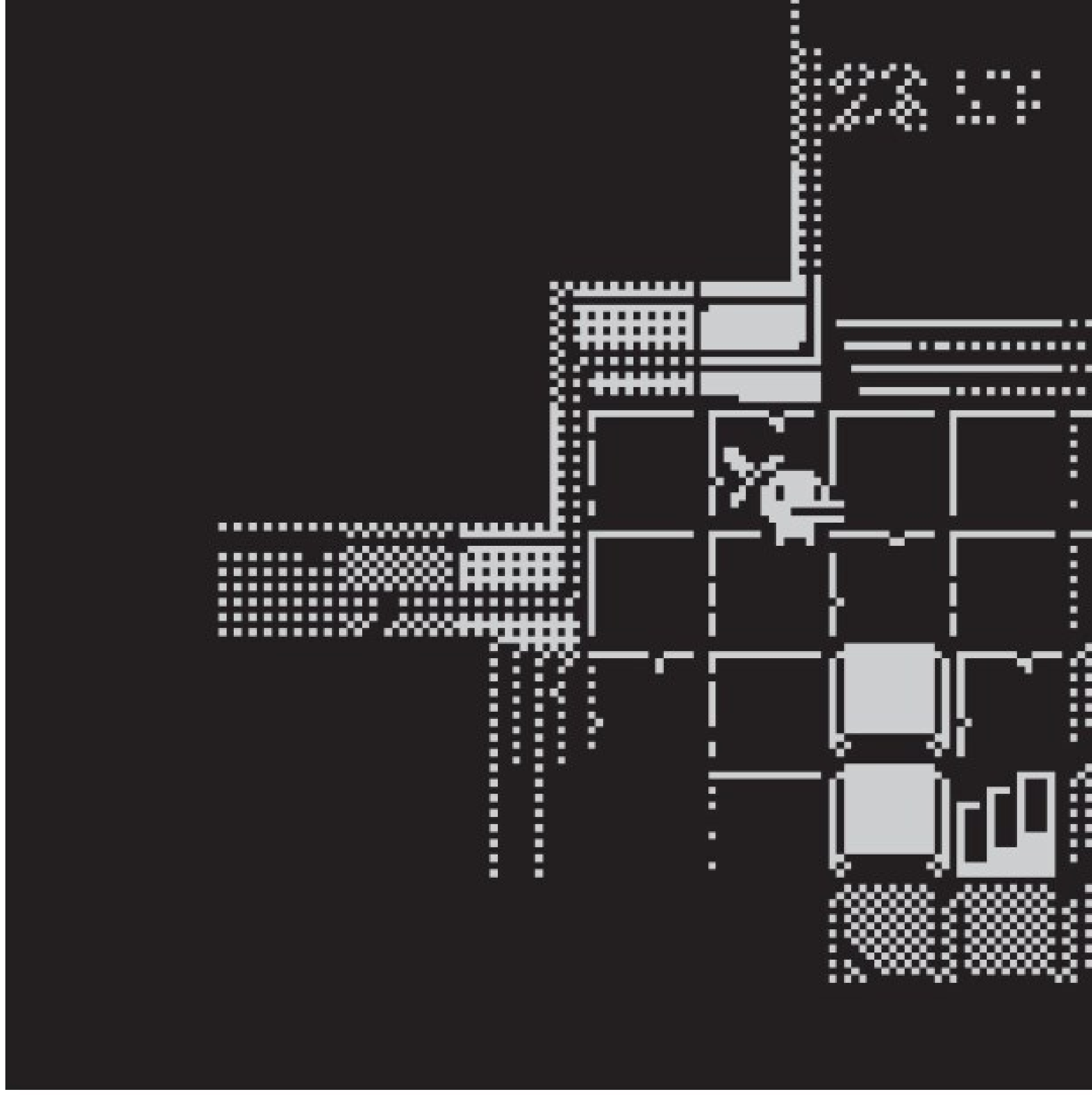
Though the tenets from the shuttered publishers were carried forward, Devolver wanted to take a digital-first approach with its publishing. "I think a big part of why it was different from the last two [companies] is digital distribution and a will to work with developers of all sizes," Lowrie says. "The ability to take down the retail walls that were there, which is what publishers were for, but now it kind of reinvented what a publisher can mean to a developer, and it wasn't about getting a store shelf placement in GameStop or Target or whatever."

The most influential storefront in digital distribution – Valve's Steam – proved to be a boon for the digital-facing Devolver. "The transformation that Steam made, not just in the revenue share, but the fact that they paid you every single month, that was just incredible to us because all we've ever done in our previous companies was chase money because you ship the product, the retailers didn't pay you, the distribution people didn't pay you. It was horrible," Struthers says.

Steam's explosion as a digital storefront happened simultaneously with a massive sea change that made development more widely accessible thanks to high-quality game engines like Unity and Game Maker. Platform holders like Sony also began providing development kits to smaller developers. The result was Devolver coming into the picture at just the right time with the right approach.

↖
Cult of the Lamb

Serious Sam 3
↓



GETTING SERIOUS

Croteam approaching Devolver right as the company was getting up and running to publish Serious Sam 3 was serendipitous. However, with the game still a ways off, the publisher wanted to get its legs under it. Devolver published HD remasters of the series' first two games in its first couple of years as a company. Then, in the lead-up to the launch of Serious Sam 3: BFE, Lowrie had a unique idea to promote the franchise's third entry.

"We reached out to three different developers who we admired what they were working on in that indie space and said, 'Hey, do you know the Serious Sam series, and if so, would you like to make a game with the IP with no restrictions?'" Lowrie says. "We were very delighted that all of them did, and they put together some pretty weird, crazy ideas based on fundamental things that made Serious Sam what it is and identifiable."

The three games – Serious Sam Double D, a side-scrolling shooter from Mommy's Best Games; Serious Sam: Kamikaze Attack!, an auto-runner from Be-Rad Entertainment; and Serious Sam: The Random Encounter, a turn-based RPG from Vlambeer – all launched in 2011 in the lead up to the third mainline game.

Initially, Vlambeer's Rami Ismail and Jan Willem Nijman resisted the idea. "They reached out to us, and we were very indie kids at the time," Nijman recalls. "It was like, 'Okay, publishers? That's not indie. Indie means independent, you have to do everything yourself, so let's give these people a horrible pitch, a terrible idea for a game: Let's turn Serious Sam into a turn-based RPG. It makes no sense at all. They'll think it's ridiculous.' And then we got an email back saying, 'Okay, let's do it!' And we were like, 'Oh, s---.'"

The experience proved successful for Vlambeer; the Ismail and Nijman duo would develop Luftrausers under the Devolver banner in 2014, while Nijman teamed up with three other indie creators to release Minit in 2018. For Nijman, he immediately noticed the benefits of working with Devolver. "[It's nice] to have someone who can do all the non-creative work," he says. "Some of it is very creative, but like, we don't want to deal with all the legal stuff and marketing stuff and making trailers and localization. It was just a good fit and it just worked well for us; we can do creative stuff and someone else worries about the other side."

Devolver Digital co-founder and COO Graeme Struthers at PAX ↓

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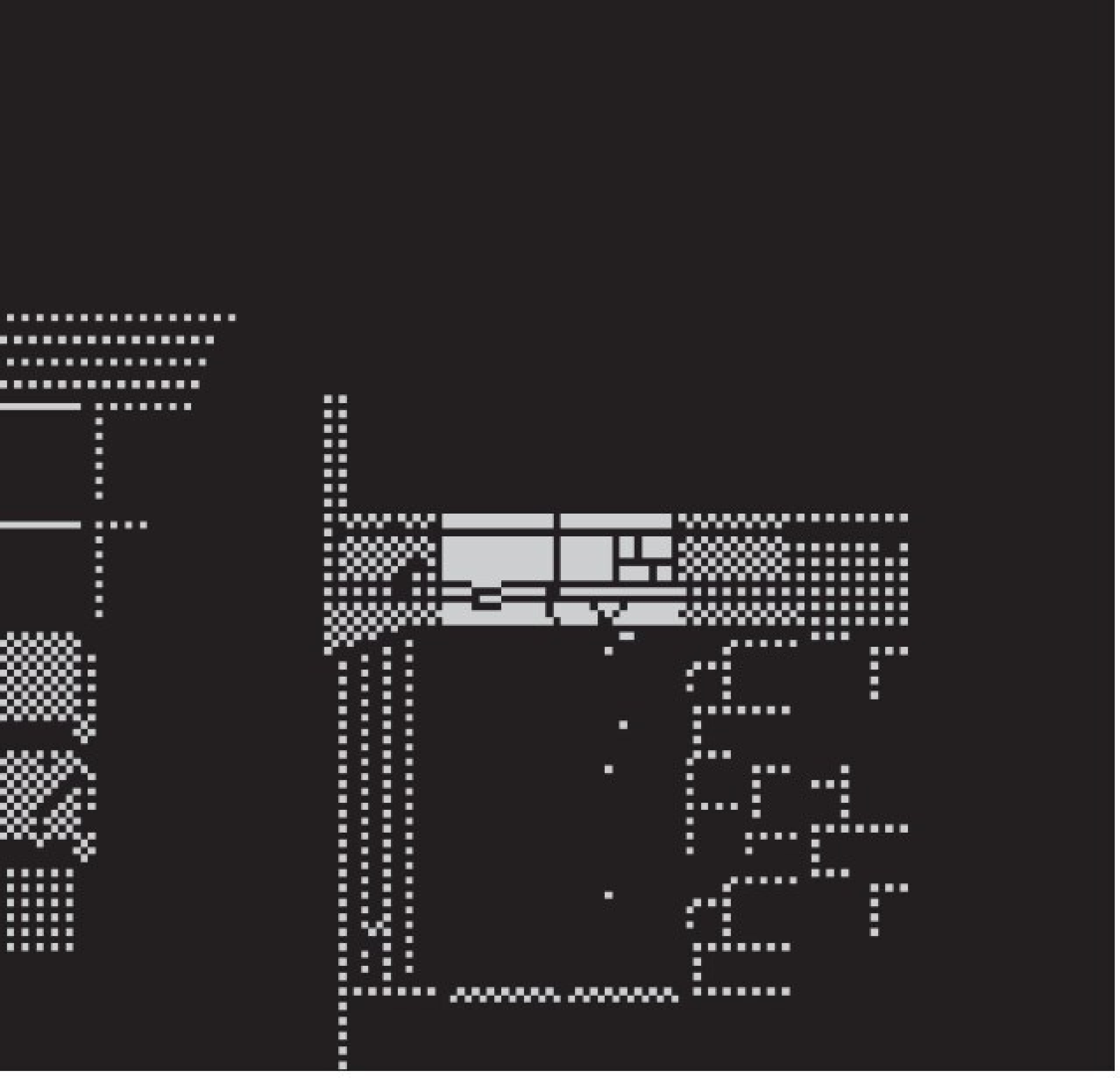

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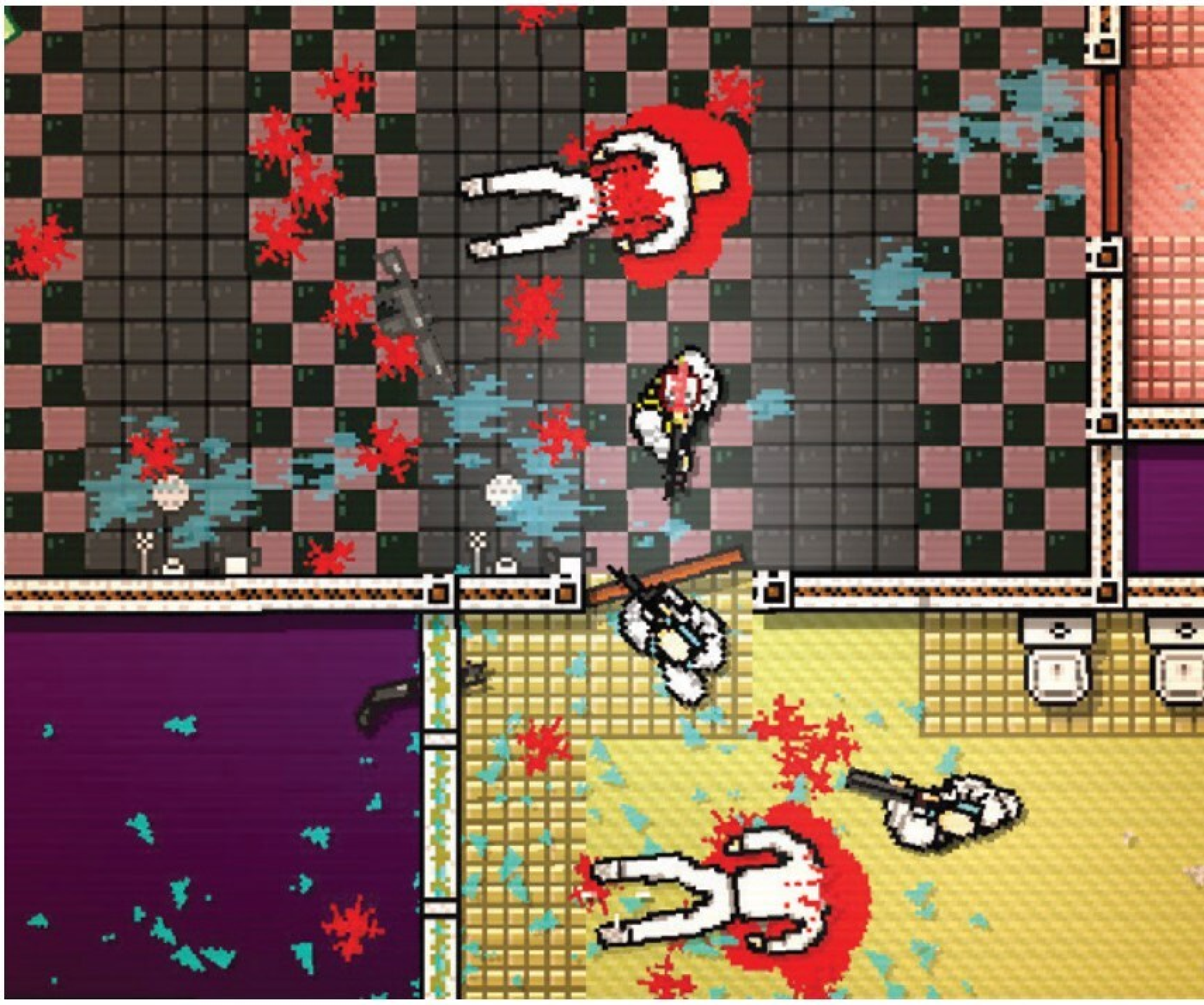

CALLING THE HOTLINE

Though Serious Sam 3: BFE was successful for Devolver and received generally positive reviews, those spin-offs proved instrumental in determining the future direction of the publishing label. “It was just an awakening, I guess, that there was something to be done here with these people, these developers making very creative, very original games,” Lowrie says. “They could compete neck and neck with the largest games out there.”

Leveraging its newly established relationship with Ismail and Nijman, Devolver began building a network of promising independent developers. After working with Vlambeer on Serious Sam: The Random Encounter, Ismail and Nijman were so satisfied with their experience with Devolver that they introduced the team to Jonatan Söderström, a Swedish indie developer fresh off a 2010 win of the Nuovo Award at the Independent Games Festival for his puzzle game Tuning, in hopes that Devolver would publish it.

“Jonatan was like, ‘Actually, myself and Dennis Wedin are working on a different game that we’re pretty interested in,’ and at the time, I think it was called Cocaine Cowboys, but it obviously became Hotline Miami,” Lowrie recalls. “There was an instant recognition of something that was really fun to play. It was real basic at the time, but really fun to play. And then you fast forward to a year or two later and the game launches, and it was crazy. It went nuts.”

A simple-yet-challenging, ultraviolent top-down shooter set in Miami in the 1980s, Dennaton Games’ Hotline Miami launched in 2012 and immediately became the poster child for Devolver’s success and helped establish a tone synonymous with the label. In addition to earning several award nominations and an 85 on reviews aggregate site Metacritic, Hotline Miami is considered one of the most influential independent video games ever, and spawned a sequel, Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number, in 2015.

Hotline Miami’s success and the success of Subset Games’ FTL: Faster Than Light told Devolver that indie games had a place in the mainstream consciousness. Lowrie likens this explosion to seeing his favorite corner of niche music in a record store suddenly moving to the front, causing a realization that other people love it as well. “We caught such momentum that you’re seeing not just *Game Informer* and *Destructoid* and *IGN* report on it, but you’re getting *Wired* articles and things like that,” he says. “It’s stretching out to a totally different audience – things that we try to still achieve to this day. I think that made us think, ‘Hey, for these relatively small budgets, you can really punch above your weight, and I think we’ve been trying to do that ever since.”

↓
Counter-clockwise: Hotline Miami, Luftrausers, Minit

BRANCHING OUT

Coming off the success of Hotline Miami, Devolver was seen as the hot, new publishing label to work with. According to various developers I spoke with, the laid-back attitude, contracts that allow developers to retain the rights to their creations, a willingness to handle tasks creatives don't want to touch, and one of the better revenue shares in the industry helped establish it as one of the best labels for indies. And word was spreading fast, largely thanks to the interconnected indie community.

Not just that, but Devolver and its many games became destinations at various tradeshows. Whether talking about big booths at PAX, appearances with Nintendo at GDC, or a parking lot booth across the street from E3, Devolver helped get lesser-known games in front of the masses. Devolver developed a reputation as a tastemaker of sorts; if Devolver published a game, it almost felt like a seal of approval with a high success rate.

"When the game was announced, so many people said they would try it as it was a Devolver game," Massive Monster director of game design on Cult of the Lamb Jay Armstrong says. "Getting that label is such an incredible advantage in the battle for just getting people's eyeballs."

Sabotage Studio successfully self-published Sea of Stars in 2023, but for the studio, there's no doubt that Devolver played a part in getting the studio to where it is today. "They put us on the map," The Messenger director Thierry Boulanger says. "Just the fact that they even signed the game, them being seen as not just publishers, they're also curators, and so this early sign of approval really gave us a first leg up."

For solo developer Gabe Cuzzillo, he was getting to a point where he needed to find a publisher for his student project at New York University, Ape Out. When the introduction was made with Devolver, things moved fast. "Obviously, Hotline [Miami] was inspirational to me," Cuzzillo says. "They had a good reputation with the people who I knew and it was clear that they were the best fit for Ape Out. From pretty early on, when working on Ape Out, I was thinking that would be the dream scenario."

Introductions like that were common when the company started and continue to occur today. "I can't emphasize enough that this company is built on relationships and history," Lowrie says. "Those folks that we work with, specifically Vlambeer more so than anybody, went on to introduce us to more people. They were happy with how we worked together and what they were able to do and the freedom that they're given. Ultimately, if you look at this branching tree of history, we are introduced to Dennaton for Hotline Miami, which in certain ways led to BroForce and working with Free Lives, who we've made six or seven games with now, and the Dodge Roll folks, and it just keeps branching out from there."

Not only that, but developers had started taking notice of the tone Devolver delivered through games like Hotline Miami, BroForce, and the Shadow Warrior games. Lowrie's insistence on establishing a snarky, irreverent, yet self-reflective tone within the company is largely to thank.

That fun-loving attitude has resonated with developers, with the label having published more than 140 games in its 15-year history. Looking at Devolver Digital's game library, it becomes evident that once developers release a game under the label, they will likely return and create another game. Vlambeer created two games published by Devolver before Jan Willem Nijman returned as part of a four-person team with Minit. Free Lives has published eight games under the Devolver umbrella, while Croteam is in the double digits under the label. Cuzzillo is also returning to Devolver later this year with Baby Steps.

However, of all the developers I spoke with, Boulanger and his studio, Sabotage, chose not to return to Devolver with its follow-up to the Devolver-published The Messenger: Sea of Stars, a turn-based RPG that landed on *Game Informer*'s top 10 games of 2023 list. Sabotage opted to go with the self-publishing route for that game.

"We wanted to be completely independent, because we did the crowdfunding, it was like, 'Can we actually self-fund this as much as possible?" Boulanger, who also directed Sea of Stars, says. "It was more about the experience. It's like, we just love making games, we love running our studio, and it's like, what if we actually did everything? Not that it necessarily makes sense or the return-on-investment is positive, but just to say that we did it.[...] That was basically the call to adventure."

The Messenger
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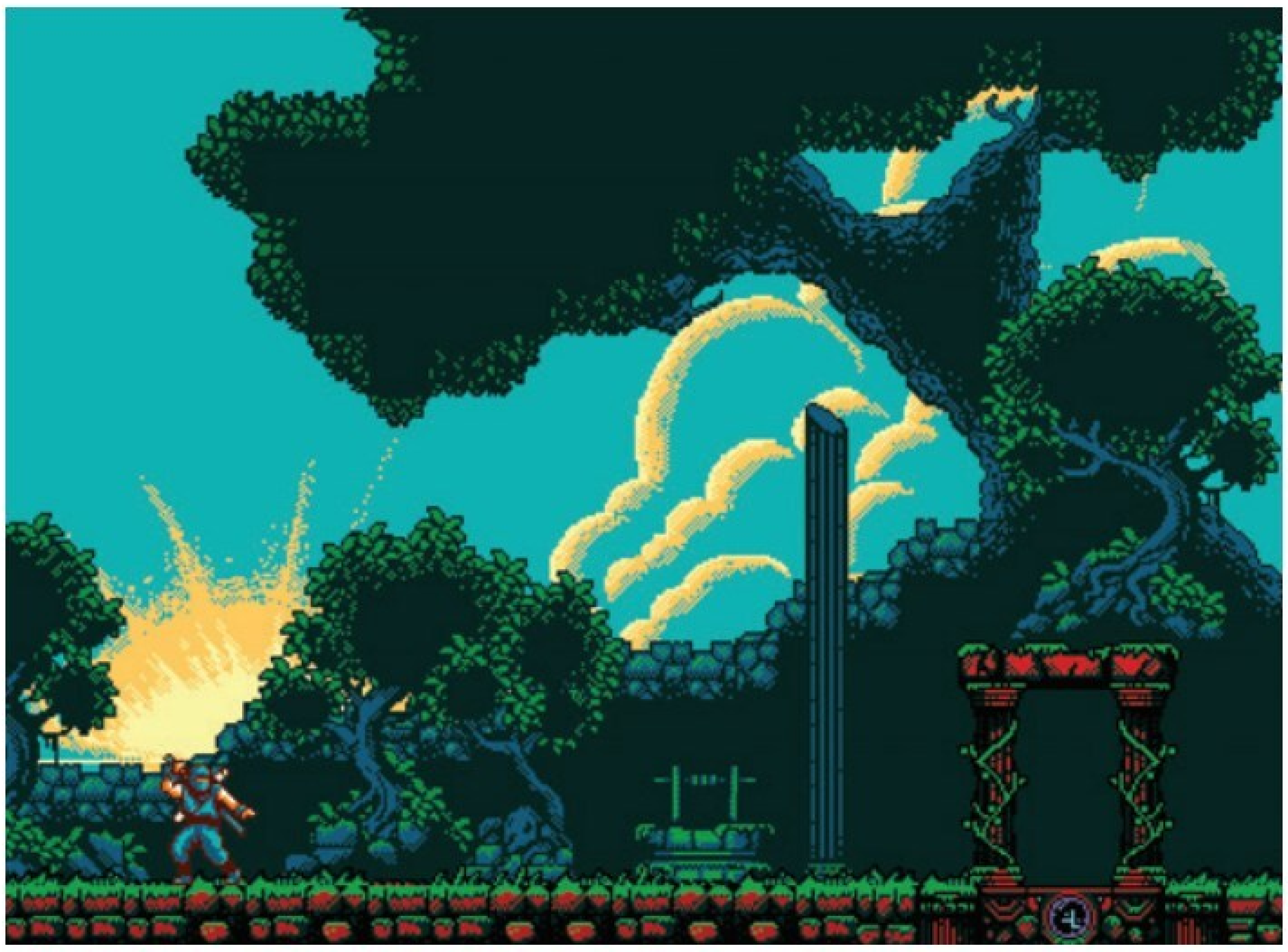

↑ Devolver's official company photo

Despite wanting to conquer that dream of self-publishing a game, Boulanger fondly looks back at his time working with Devolver, thanks largely to the label's personal approach to business. "They really felt like they were consistently, genuinely happy for us whenever we had a win or a beat or something happened," he says. "Having not worked with any other publishers is essentially why it will be them or nothing moving forward."

EYEING THE NEXT 15

Though Devolver has grown since its founding in 2009, it has maintained the same spirit upon which the label was built. But with the rise of digital media, Devolver has thrived publishing games across every platform.

"I feel like Devolver is really good at adapting," Minit artist Kitty Calis says. "Making games is kind of like predicting the future, and sometimes you start on a game and the market is a specific way, and then two years later when the game is out, the market is different. And they just find a way to make it work."

"And they're going to need to keep changing," Nijman follows up. "They're not the same company they were 5 years ago or 10 years ago. They're constantly changing. If they didn't, they would be dead by now or horrible."

The core of Devolver remains finding unique, interesting, underdog games and helping bring them to mass markets, which is why the company succeeded in the first place. Unlike in 2009, though, with just five employees to start, Devolver today is a publicly traded company that employs more than 200 people directly and through subsidiaries. "It's about finding really interesting things and bringing them to a large audience and hopefully helping that developer both get their art out to the world and also make a living on said art," Lowrie says. "I think that's maintained. That's the same. What's different is there's a lot more people to do that and to keep tabs on how the industry changes, tastes change, things like that."

Though Lowrie acknowledges that it's difficult to predict the future, Devolver's track record has shown an ability and willingness to adapt, even as it keeps its core principles in place. "I hope that nothing changes, in a lot of ways, from what we're doing," he says. "There's plenty of other people doing other things in games, but I think we want to push the artistic boundaries as much as we can, and the fun that can be had. I don't think there's been a lot of change in the last 10 years, and I hope there's not a lot of change in the next 10 years because I think games are really, really cool, and I hope that we can keep that up." ■

BroForce ↓

Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater

ONE LAST THING

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

WE LOVE REMAKES AND REMASTERS in this industry. Technology limitations act as powerful restrictors on how and even if a game can be played. Sure, remakes and remasters can sometimes feel like an easy cash grab exploiting our nostalgia, but just as often they function as a means of video game preservation or a way to play an old game that is otherwise inaccessible. There are two approaches to this process: remakes that create completely new assets and are complete overhauls of an original game and remasters that clean up the original game to just make them look shiny and new. Here's what is coming soon for both. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

UPCOMING REMAKES

Disney Epic Mickey: Rebrushed *(September 24)*
Silent Hill 2 *(October 8)*
Romancing SaGa 2: Revenge of the Seven *(October 24)*
Dragon Quest III: HD-2D Remake *(November 14)*
Gothic *(2024)*
Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater *(2024)*
Until Dawn *(2024)*
Dragon Quest I & II HD-2D Remake *(2025)*
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time *(2026)*
Front Mission 3 *(TBA)*
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic *(TBA)*
Max Payne 1 and 2 *(TBA)*
Splinter Cell *(TBA)*
The Witcher *(TBA)*

UPCOMING REMASTERS

Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse *(August 14)*
Age of Mythology: Retold *(September 4)*
Ace Attorney Investigations Collection *(September 6)*
Dead Rising Deluxe Remaster *(September 19)*
Lollipop Chainsaw RePop *(September 25)*
Sonic X Shadow Generations *(October 24)*
Clock Tower: Rewind *(2024)*
Shadows of the Damned Hella Remastered *(2024)*
The Thing: Remastered *(2024)*
Killing Time: Resurrected *(TBA)*
Suikoden I & II HD Remaster Gate Rune and Dunan Unification Wars *(TBA)* ■

Check out our big list of upcoming video game remakes on GameInformer.com for more details on these games

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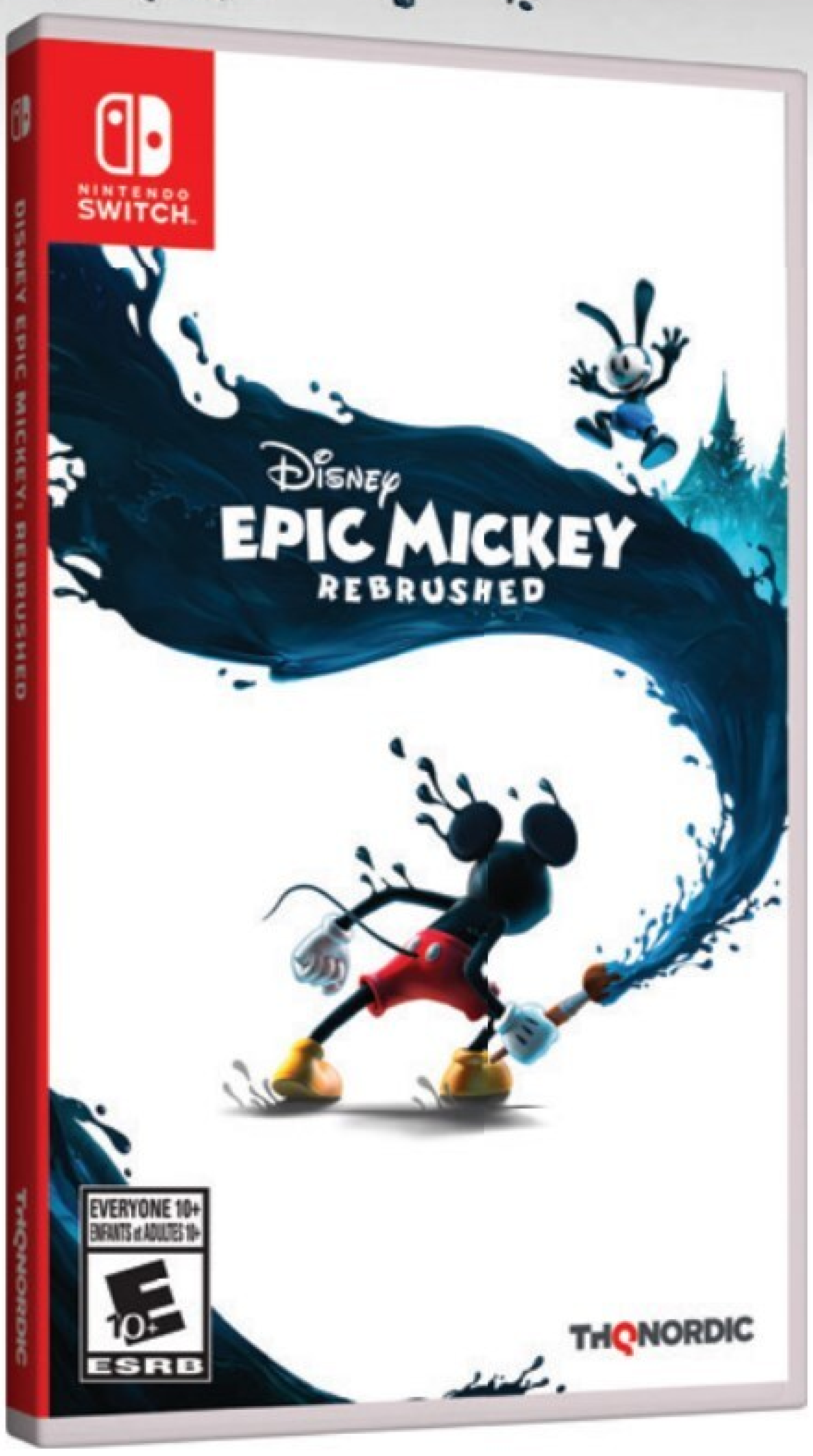
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